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Henry Thoreau's Debt to Society: A Micro Literary History

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HENRY THOREAU'S DEBT TO SOCIETY: A MICRO LITERARY HISTORY

A Thesis Presented

by

LAURA JILL DWIGGINS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2013

The University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of History

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“Henry Thoreau’s Debt to Society: A Micro Literary History”

A Thesis Presented

By

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DEDICATION

To Rachel and Vann.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their time and expertise, many thanks are due to my committee members in The University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of History: Barry Levy, Marla Miller, and John Higginson. Thanks also to Philip F. Gura of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to Jeffrey S. Cramer of the Walden Woods Project's Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, and to the Concord Museum.

ABSTRACT

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MAY 2013

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This thesis examines Henry David Thoreau's relationships with New England-based authors, publishers, and natural scientists, and their influences on his composition and professional development. The study highlights Thoreau's collaboration with figures such as John Thoreau, Jr., William Ellery Channing II, Horace Greeley, and a number of correspondents and natural scientists. The study contends that Thoreau was a sociable and professionally competent author who relied not only on other major Transcendentalists, but on members from an array of intellectual communities at all stages of his career.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many studies of American Transcendentalism begin – and many end – with a procession of the movement’s literary predecessors. Because Transcendentalism was a highly place-based literary movement, critics are right to look to the intellectual traditions and regional tools these authors inherited. We are right to associate *Walden* and *Nature* with German philosophy, British Romanticism, Revolutionary mythology, Boston social orders, and tensions within Unitarianism. But to confine serious literary and historical study to the most well-known texts and the generations that preceded them is to ignore a huge dimension of friendship, patronage, collaboration, and networking of many “like-minded” individuals in the 1840’s and 1850’s eastern Massachusetts.¹

The Transcendentalist authors, both canonized and obscure, comprised a writing and publishing circle unique in its original members’ geographical proximity and contributions to one another’s work. These associations shaped their methods of composition and publication, and ultimately extended well beyond Concord, MA. The paper trail of Henry Thoreau in particular reveals a surprisingly public writing process dependent on his inner circle, most notably on his siblings, Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, and more loosely on natural scientists, in addition to the famous “Concord Quartet” (Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and Hawthorne).² Thoreau’s professional

¹ James Elliot Cabot, *Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 249.

² Samuel A. Schreiner, *The Concord Quartet: Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and the Friendship That Freed the American Mind* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2006). Because Hawthorne was not nearly as involved in Thoreau’s composition and publication, he will not receive the attention given to Alcott and Emerson in this study.

relationships with his intellectual peers provide us with both a valuable case study of the Transcendentalists' uniquely intimate writing community, as well as an opportunity to reconsider "the hermit of Concord" as a more social and professional human being who engaged with intellectual spheres until the end of his life.

This project builds upon the work of university scholars and public historians who have pushed our understanding of Thoreau well beyond his Walden hermitage, particularly in the last seventy-five years of Transcendentalist studies. However, the effort requires a more devoted discussion of Thoreau's relationships within and beyond the Transcendentalist movement, and their material impact on his body of work. Therefore, this study, which I have termed a "micro literary history," not only serves as a social history or biography, but also goes on to evaluate the composition and reception of uniquely "Thoreauvian" pieces often overshadowed by *Walden*, such as *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and "Slavery in Massachusetts."

The study of Thoreau's professional circle and writing life will proceed loosely in chronological order from his early letters, to his *Journal* and other mediums of his early composition, to his publication and lecturing efforts, to the late 1850's journal entries Thoreau intended for a more scientific manuscript. The final chapter will use this revaluation of Thoreau's network to consider the roles that literary, scientific, and local social communities played in the composition of Thoreau's most ambitious project, the merging of Transcendentalism and scientific naturalism in the late *Journal*. This progression will also take into consideration lectures, manuscript drafts, and published books and essays. Of course, the issue of chronology is complicated by Thoreau's culling of his journals and his multi-year revision process, but it is precisely this intricate

process that will be newly illuminated by an analysis of his family, social and professional influences over the years.

1.1 Historiography

The Emerson-Thoreau friendship has been the subject of more studies than any other Transcendentalist relationship, and perhaps rightly so.³ A mass of surviving letters and anecdotes makes their relationship interesting, such as Thoreau's stint as Emerson's handyman, their strikingly personal correspondence while either was away from Concord, their shared journaling, and Emerson's benevolent, if sometimes exasperated, support of Thoreau's composition.⁴ Most importantly, the pervasiveness of Emersonian philosophy in Thoreau's writings has ensured their relationship critical attention.

And yet, biographers have not produced substantial analyses of a variety of other Transcendentalist figures' bearings on Thoreau's writing and writing process. A brief discussion of Transcendentalist historiography – historiography not of the generations of literary tradition that preceded them, but of the era itself and Thoreau's role within it – will clarify the critical work from which this study proceeds, and the points at which analyses of Thoreau's writing circle so far have been left undeveloped.

Ralph Waldo Emerson has been called Thoreau's "first biographer," in reference to a eulogy he delivered at the First Parish Church in Concord on May 9th 1862. This reflection of Thoreau would circulate in the next decade, a gentle but damning

³ For more on the Emerson-Thoreau relationship, see Harmon Smith, *My Friend, My Friend: The Story of Thoreau's Relationship with Emerson* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). ; John Lysaker and William Rossi, *Emerson and Thoreau: Figures of Friendship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁴ For example, Emerson allowed Thoreau to construct his Walden house on Emerson's woodlot, yet years later would write in his own journal "I tell [Thoreau] that a man was not made to live in a swamp, but a frog. If God meant him to live in a swamp, he would have made him a frog." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Edward W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1912), Vol. IX, 153.

assessment of Thoreau as a talent without ambition, the “captain of a huckleberry party.”⁵ More complimentary was Emerson’s article printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* days later, but although both works discussed Thoreau’s prose style at some length, neither mentioned his composition methods and professionalization. For our purposes, Emerson’s public writing on Thoreau sheds little light upon Thoreau’s writing modes and circumstances. The same can be said of Ellery Channing’s biographical sketch in 1873, more nostalgically poetic than reliable.⁶ Channing did, however, instigate an era of benevolent (if not rigorously accurate) biography on Thoreau, capitalizing on Concord’s earliest bouts of nostalgia for its Transcendentalist era.⁷ In the next decades, before the turn of the century, Franklin B. Sanborn would perform some of the first serious biographical work on Thoreau, interviewing the last of Thoreau’s acquaintances and building monographs largely upon the anecdotal stories of the generation behind Thoreau, who had outlived and remembered him.⁸

The twentieth century saw a renewed interest in Thoreau largely through the efforts of Raymond Adams. Adams’s work in the UNC-Chapel Hill English Department and his private correspondence with Francis Allen, Henry Canby, Allen French, and Walter Harding established a devoted core of Thoreau disciples in the mid-twentieth century that eventually formed the Thoreau Society in the 1940’s, reflecting heightened

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature in Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. George Stade (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), 429.

⁶ William Ellery Channing, *The Poet-Naturalist: with Memorial Verses* (New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1966).

⁷ Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 3-4.

⁸ Franklin B. Sanborn, *Henry D. Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1910). Simultaneous to the preparation for Sanborn’s book, Henry Salt’s biography was published in three versions between 1890 and 1908. Thoreau’s next biographers included Henry Canby and Joseph Wood Crutch.

popular support for Thoreau's ideas.⁹ Walter Harding, then the secretary and later president of the Thoreau Society, remained instrumental to Thoreau's organized following for the duration of the century: through the more utilitarian use of Thoreau's ideas in the '60's activism era, to the standardization of Thoreau in high school and university curriculums and the explosion of university-published monographs between the 1970's and 1990's. The 1941 founding of the Thoreau Society, the Transcendentalist-related exhibits and educational programming of the Concord Museum, and the work of trade press authors such as Samuel Schreiner all reflect a popular interest in Thoreau's biography that is well provided for, at least in Thoreau country. Concord has effectively humanized Thoreau – embracing, for example, the Emerson-Thoreau friendship as town lore and as a strategic public history tool.

However, literary and historical discussions intended for public audiences inevitably must condense and sometimes simplify the story, and Thoreau more than most historical figures has been reduced to a skewed version of himself: the hermit of Walden. The greatest contribution of Thoreau scholars of the second half of the twentieth century was the renewal of interest in his personal life beyond the quirky anecdotes contained in Sanborn's biography. Academic monographs began to chip away at this perception first instilled by the elegiac treatments of his personal life (such as Channing's *Poet-Naturalist*). Therefore, works of Sherman Paul, Mary Moller, and Robert Richardson will all inform this study substantially.¹⁰ What remains is this: to use our recent

⁹ This correspondence is found in the Walden Woods Project's Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods Library, in the Thoreau Society's Raymond Adams Collection.

¹⁰ Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958). ; Mary E. Moller, *Thoreau in the Human Community* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). ; Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

appreciation for Henry Thoreau as more than a hermit in order to appreciate his professional work. To achieve this, we must apply the relationships of Thoreau's life to his compositional practices. Fortunately these relationships are comprised of unique and memorable characters, making Thoreau's writing circle an effective starting point to reach students and the general public.

The study of human relationships as a way to understand composition will present a new, substantive but appealing mode of thinking about the Transcendentalists. As we consider Thoreau's permeation of high school and university curricula (but not necessarily the arsenal of the average student), this paper will propose that the social and private relationships of Thoreau's life are effective points from which to teach and interpret his texts. As mentioned, Thoreau's biography certainly is employed today in more creative avenues than in the past century, such as The Concord Museum's recent publication on Thoreau and material culture and its "Early Spring: Thoreau and Climate Change" exhibit, as well as digital platforms such as the Thoreau Society's "Mapping Thoreau Country."¹¹ Thoreau, then, has been adapted to the technological and pedagogical advancements of the twenty-first century. The intimacy of an American writer's social circle provides educators and public historians with still a new opportunity to utilize the human environment of these writers' era to teach their literary and cultural significance.

A few institutions, mostly based in Concord, Massachusetts, have begun this approach, albeit generally limited to the scope of the Emerson/Thoreau friendship. For

¹¹ "Early Spring: Henry Thoreau and Climate Change," *The Concord Museum*, accessed 7 March 2013, <http://www.concordmuseum.org/concord-museum-early-spring-exhibition.php>; David F. Wood, *An Observant Eye: The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum* (Concord: The Concord Museum, 2006); "Mapping Thoreau Country," *The Thoreau Society*, 2012, accessed 2 February 2013, <http://www.mappingthoreaucountry.org/>.

example, the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods promotes activism and education inspired by Thoreau's published themes of self-discovery and proto-environmentalism. This mission could not succeed if the Institute relied purely on Thoreau's texts and did not introduce their patrons to Thoreau's highly relatable life. The Concord Museum, meanwhile, enjoys the luxury of material culture as an avenue through which to tell stories about the relationships of the Concord authors. These relationships, between Emerson, Thoreau, and other former owners of the museum's artifacts, provide viewers a dimension of understanding to the author's writing – the writing being the reason for their canonization and (generally) the reason why the audience has come.

1.2 Biographical Criticism in Literary History

As one would expect, then, the ideas in the texts render our understanding of their context important. In a sense, a thorough examination of Thoreau's professional and social life endeavors to ground in the best possible research that which author's museums attempt: the rejuvenation of the public's interest in and comprehension of an author's work by embracing the value of biography in literary history.

Although literary biography may serve as interesting stories in and of themselves, or as valuable "snapshots" of an era, the genre is subject to criticism if its purpose is in part to elucidate a genre or literary tradition. Certainly, the biography of an author risks partitioning off the progression of literary ideas over decades, and even generations.¹² Even if an author's timeframe of writing or publication mirrors the onset and transition out of a movement or series of ideas, the biography genre may obscure the evolution of

¹² René Welleck and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 75-80, quoted in Peter France and William St. Clair, *Mapping Lives: the Uses of Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

literary traditions by rendering the life of an author a unit of measurement or representative cycle of the tradition.

While this research on Thoreau's compositional and professional relationships focuses on the act of writing and publishing by Thoreau as an individual, the risk of compartmentalizing our sights to his contributions alone is minimized by three characteristics of the study. The study, to begin with, holds a pointed emphasis on Thoreau's writing circle, which we come to understand are the center points of other spheres beyond Thoreau's scope. Additionally, Thoreau makes a late entry to the Transcendentalist scene, being over a decade younger than Emerson and his contemporaries, and (as I will argue) died working on a major Transcendentalist text even as the movement at large was over. In other words, there can be no supposing that Thoreau marks the beginning and end of Transcendentalist ideas. Finally, Transcendentalism, as we will see, is nearly indefinable as a set of dates under the broad definition that the movement's members gave themselves. In my discussion of Thoreau's private and public relationships I do not intend to elucidate the beginning or end of Transcendentalist ideas, but depict a new perception of Thoreau as a working professional that relies upon the social history of this group of prominent New England thinkers and associates.

Therefore, the following analysis of the eastern Massachusetts writing and scientific community, and its role in the life and legacy of Henry Thoreau, comprises a micro literary history. Historical literary criticism certainly plays a vital role in this angle, as I rely on the notion that the behavior of and relationships between people – not just

between their texts – enables our understanding of Thoreau’s work.¹³ This assumption is not strictly made, however, to the purpose of expounding new interpretations of Thoreau’s published texts. Rather, the social and personal contexts in which Thoreau wrote allow the fullest understanding Thoreau’s method of composition. At stake, then, in this project at least, is not primarily the use of Thoreau’s biography to interpret his writing, but the writing circle’s biography in order to interpret his *act* of writing.

It is true that such a biographical study of Thoreau’s world dismisses some of the very precepts found in his work.¹⁴ In a way, to place Thoreau’s private relationships under the microscope is to study him in a very different way than he himself promoted. However, the caricature his legacy faces – either as a hermit, or as something of a novelty in American literary canon – also deviates considerably from the way Thoreau saw himself. The remedy of this perception requires careful biographical study that appeals to public as well as academic audiences.

The final question, then, remains: why is Thoreau’s personal reputation worth correcting? If Thoreau is primarily (and rightly) known for his writing, what do we gain by making him the main character of a biographical study, no matter how reliant on his composition? The answer is two-fold. As we’ve seen, Thoreau’s personal relationships pertaining to his writing offer a vital approach to Thoreau that combats the “hermit of Concord” misconception that has shaded the way we read his work. The adjustment of this perception will encourage thoughtful, new exhibits and educational programming by

¹³ For more on biographical criticism in literary history, see Michael Erben, “The Problem of Other Lives: Social Perspectives on Written Biography,” *Sociology* 27, no. 1 (1993): 15-25. ; Aleksei Kholikov, “The Writer’s Biography: A Genre Without Rules,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 46, no. 1 (2009-10): 48-67. ; Graham Bradshaw, “Current Literature: Criticism, Literary Theory, Literary History & Biography,” *English Studies* 2 (1989): 132-146.

¹⁴ Ann Jefferson, “Sainte-Beuve: Biography, Criticism, and the Literary,” in *Mapping Lives: the Uses of Biography*, eds. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 135.

public history institutions such as The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods and The Concord Museum – institutions which, as we have seen, employ Thoreau’s life to promote his ideas relating to nature study, civil disobedience, and writing. Additionally, biographical study on this particular author is fruitful because Thoreau’s habits of composition and publication indicate the intricacy of the Transcendentalist network’s intellectual environment, which in time proved hugely important to the development of the American intellectual climate. This micro literary history depicts just one lifetime of intellectual sharing.

CHAPTER 2

THOREAU'S SOCIAL COMPOSITION

2.1 Why Concord?

In 1837, half a century after the American Revolution, Concord, Massachusetts was firmly established as a town of national historical significance, and celebrated itself accordingly. The town upheld and remodeled the Old North Bridge, and held anniversary and bicentennial celebrations for the North Bridge battle and the town's founding. Concord even merited a stop on the Marquis de Lafayette's "1776" tour in 1824. In 1835 the town's history was chronicled in a major publication by Lemuel Shattuck, *History of the Town of Concord*. Before Concord became known as a major hub of intellectual activity, then, it built upon the same agricultural and revolutionary history that has fed much of the town's historical societies and tourism today.¹⁵

However, in 1837, just after Henry Thoreau graduated in the middle of his Harvard class, his native town of Concord looked very different from the Concord of the twenty-first century. It was ten square miles larger in area (at 36 square miles) and held roughly a quarter of its 2010 population.¹⁶ It was a comparatively significant merchant hub and more of a travel through-point than a final destination for non-residents. So as we consider the formation of the Transcendentalist movement as a chapter in New England's literary history, we may ask: why Concord?

The short answer, of course, is the establishing presence of Ralph Waldo Emerson. By 1836 he had lived in Concord for one year and published a small but potent

¹⁵ Lemuel Shattuck, *A History of the Town of Concord, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: from its Earliest Settlement to 1832: and of the Adjoining Towns, Bedford, Acton, Lincoln, and Carlisle, Containing Various Notices of County and State History Not Before Published* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company, 1835).

¹⁶ Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, Chapter 4.

book, *Nature*. Over the next decade a number of other thinkers and writers would take up residence in the streets around him, including Amos Bronson Alcott in 1840 and Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1842. Henry Thoreau, however, stands apart from the rest of them in that he enjoyed the title of “Concord native.”

During his university period of studying and teaching outside his home town, Thoreau was perhaps always bound to return; he did so in 1837. Alcott, Hawthorne, and Ellery Channing (among others) would come later.¹⁷ The key Transcendentalists and their guests eventually resided within a mile and a half of one another on the main roads in Concord, and the nearby cliffs and ponds were an afternoon or evening’s walk away. Thoreau later writes in his *Journal* about attending what has become known as the early Transcendental Club, the tightest-knit peer circle in Thoreau’s life and the most familiar to historians today. It preceded many of the organized (and unorganized) literary groups also known in the United States and western literary traditions by a full century. Distinct from the Beat and Lost Generations, the Inklings and Fugitives, the Algonquin Round Table and Bloomsbury Group, the Concord Transcendentalists faced, from their mid-sized town, both the early modes of industrialization and the social and political reform rumblings prior to the mid-nineteenth century.

2.2 The Concord Writing Circle

Thoreau’s Transcendentalism, which will pervade our full discussion, may be compressed to two tenets: the sovereignty of the individual conscience and the moral benefit of seeking higher laws through a relationship with the natural world. However, it is dangerous to project a set of beliefs and priorities on the movement as a whole. As J.

¹⁷ Additionally, Margaret Fuller stayed with the Emersons regularly, and Franklin Sanborn boarded with the Thoreaus.

A. Saxton wrote, “[Transcendentalism] is the practical philosophy of belief and conduct. Every man is a transcendentalist; and all true faith, the motives of all past action, are transcendental.”¹⁸ As James Freeman Clarke put it, they were “the club of like-minded; I suppose because no two of us thought alike.”¹⁹ More helpfully, Emerson eventually defined Transcendentalism as “Idealism as it appears in 1842,” his year of writing.²⁰ Of course, this group of “like-minded” thinkers did not consider themselves a titled literary movement. Early Transcendentalism should be more considered an outlook, or religious and social liberalism as it appeared in these men’s writings.

As a full movement, it held roots as inchoate as its definition. Most immediately preceding Thoreau’s era, however, we may trace it to the 1820’s. Boston served as the hub of Transcendentalism before authors began settling in Concord, indicating at least a modest popularity in the movement’s early days in the decade leading up to 1836. In the records of West Street “conversations,” participant lists show the intellectual presence of other ministers or former Unitarians that shaped and responded to Emerson’s gravitational pull. Theodore Parker, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, William Henry Channing, Frederick Henry Hedge, and Emerson himself were but the most prominent of Unitarian clergymen who loosely comprised the early American Transcendentalist movement. They wrote and spoke in favor of the individual’s personal spirituality, and of an experience of religious understanding that flew in the face of Christian conservatism. Emerson wrote in *Nature*, 1836: “The foregoing generations beheld God

¹⁸ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, viii.

¹⁹ James Elliot Cabot, *Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 249.

²⁰ Emerson, *Nature*, 98.

and nature face to face [...] why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”²¹

The entire writing life of Thoreau seems to answer this question. His body of work is not only a testament to the belief that we should enjoy such an original relation to the earth and its higher laws; it was also a literary instruction manual for how to go about it. A micro literary history of Thoreau’s social and professional orbit, however, is not the story of a break from stringent Boston Unitarianism.²² In 1837, when Thoreau entered the scene, many of the ties between these clergymen and Unitarianism had been cut: fresh from Harvard and under the new mentorship of Emerson, Thoreau entered a Boston-based intellectual community of authors, editors, and critics.

Emerson had served on a Committee of the Board of Overseers at Harvard College, a board that once examined Thoreau and other sophomores on Whately’s *Rhetoric*.²³ Emerson and Thoreau would begin a less formal friendship and patronage after Thoreau graduated and returned to Concord. Alcott would move to Concord in early 1840, an educational reformer with vital contacts to Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing (the Elder), and the Peabodys.²⁴ Finally, although William Ellery Channing II moved to Concord before he and Thoreau struck a friendship, Thoreau knew enough from a brief prior acquaintance to be pleased at his arrival. From Staten Island he wrote

²¹ Emerson, *Nature*, 9.

²² Much has been written on the deep intellectual and literary history of early Transcendentalism. See Gura, *American Transcendentalism* and Lawrence Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2006).

²³ Kenneth Walter Cameron. *Thoreau’s Harvard Years* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1966), quoted in Raymond Borst, *The Thoreau Log: A Documentary Life of Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 16.

²⁴ Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: the Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

to Emerson that Channing would do well to stay “at least long enough to establish Concord’s right and interest in him.”²⁵ Concord was, we may infer, an intellectual entity of its own by this point in the early 1840’s, and Thoreau clearly held preferences for the individuals with whom it should become associated.

As we have seen, part of the Boston hub of philosophy and reform shifted to the Transcendentalist Club in Concord. The “conversations” continued. Alcott most systematically documented these discussions, giving each session a title such as “Futurity” and “Print a Journal,” as well as listing in his own journal the invitation list.²⁶ On April 14th 1847, we find a numbered column of fourteen names including Emerson, Channing, Charles Sumner, Eliot Cabot, Thoreau, and Alcott himself.²⁷

By the 1850’s a wider list of New England thinkers was invited to Amos Bronson Alcott’s “Town and Country Club.” The circle widened to William Lloyd Garrison, Oliver Wendell Phillips, and some thirty others including ministers, orators, handymen such as Thoreau, and attorneys.²⁸ By 1855 the “Saturday Club” prevailed as an intellectual core, and most notably included critics of Transcendentalism such as James Russell Lowell, orator and politician Charles Sumner, and naturalists Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray, discussed at length later.²⁹

²⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, eds. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 123.

²⁶ Amos Bronson Alcott, *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1938), 127.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 126.

²⁸ “Records of the Town and Country Club,” Houghton Library, Harvard University. Amos Alcott Collection. Reprinted in: Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 240.

²⁹ Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry Thoreau, as Remembered by a Young Friend, Edward Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1917), 4, 59-60.

In many ways the names of these groups are unimportant, owing to the fluidity of their membership and thought. Certainly no one-to-one relationships exist between the growth and publication of Thoreau's Transcendental writing with the make-ups of these clubs or circles; furthermore, Thoreau frequently declined to attend and was not a card-carrying member of each. More significant is the *expansive* trend of the intellectual community to which Thoreau was exposed from the 1830's to the period of his death – from mostly reverends, as Thoreau graduated from Harvard College, to reverends, philosophers, workingmen, attorneys, politicians, and scientists upon his death.

The second half of this chapter will focus on Thoreau's position in and use of the Transcendentalist circle and its peripheries in the 1840's and 1850's. As we will see, their meetings and the *Dial*, along with hundreds of letters, journal entries, and personal conversations, served a dual private-yet-public role in the composition of Transcendentalist writing. In some respects, the production of Transcendentalist writing followed the simple method of composition, peer editing, and publication. The intellectual community in eastern Massachusetts shades each of these processes for authors like Thoreau who utilized the community-writing process.

Thoreau's writing experiences with authors he respected rendered him surprisingly receptive to such an open habit of composition. It was a habit, however, that Thoreau developed at a young age. Who were the earliest thinkers with whom Thoreau trusted his compositional thought and development?

2.3 Before the *Journal*

A comprehensive study of Thoreau's thought may include a discussion of his full life, and perhaps stretch even further back to his ancestors and their geographical origins,

his parents, and his education. In Thoreau's case, these would illustrate connections once removed between Thoreau and other philosophies and literary strains that fed his thought, and possibly even help determine what Sainte-Beuve calls "the moment when a genius comes into itself."³⁰ However, as our intent is to understand Thoreau's reliance on his personal relationships in his writing and professional work, we will not belabor the friends and instructors with whom he does not appear to have cultivated a significant relationship that shaped his methods for writing or publication.³¹

Thoreau, like Emerson and Fuller, relied tremendously on his correspondents as inspiration and as soundboards for his writing. Although the mass of Thoreau-Emerson letters is far from exhausted in Transcendentalist scholarship, we now stand to learn more from others close to Thoreau as revealed in his early correspondence. Therefore, before we investigate the "like-minded" thinkers, we must acknowledge an important pre-Transcendentalist influence upon Thoreau's social method of composition: his siblings. Much of Thoreau's first original thought appears in his writing relationships with John and Helen Thoreau.

Before Thoreau broke into the Concord writing sphere, he read many of what he described as his family's "circumstantial letters," that is, letters not addressed to him. He wrote to his sister in 1840 that her note to their brother John Jr. had fallen "into the hands

³⁰ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Critiques et portraits littéraires II Oeuvres*, I, 24, quoted in Ann Jefferson, "Sainte-Beuve: Biography, Criticism, and the Literary," in *Mapping Lives: the Uses of Biography*, eds. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152. In *Portraits littéraires*, Sainte-Beuve discusses early history as a clue to the process during which a human becomes or takes on the reason he is later studied.

³¹ For more on early influences that impacted Thoreau's philosophy rather than his act of composition or publication, readers should consult Thoreau's history studying German with Orestes Brownson and his catalogue of reading: Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

of his transcendental brother. [...] but what's in a name?"³² A number of bookish letters between Henry and Helen follow over the next years. After Harvard and with the exception of Thoreau's *Journal*, Helen was Thoreau's first serious outlet for higher contemplation. His letters to her include several pages written entirely in Latin, advanced pedagogical discussions, and most notably an overt slight to John Locke in October 1838:

“If [a lady] wishes to know how poor an apology for a Mental Philosophy men have tacked together [...] how they have squeezed the infinite mind into a compass that would not nonpluss a surveyor of Eastern Lands – making Imagination and Memory to lie still in their respective apartments, like ink stand and wafers in [a lady's] escritoire – why let her read Lock or Stewart, or Brown. The fact is, Mental Philosophy is very like poverty – which, you know, begins at home; and, indeed, when it goes abroad, is poverty itself.”³³

We see in these early passages Thoreau's rejection of Lockean philosophies that denigrate the worth of sensory knowledge, one of Transcendentalism's few distinct tenets. Admittedly Helen was situated a far cry from Thoreau's most profitable contacts, the educated thinkers and professional publishing circles of New England. But she was an adequate correspondent for criticism of modes of thinking, thinking that was often incompatible with Thoreau's brand of experience-based Transcendentalism that Harvard and Emerson had helped instill in Thoreau's cohort.

Thoreau's more affectionate letters to his brother John Jr., although less pedantic, exhibit his early turn towards Transcendentalist notions of the natural world and reform, a turn too often attributed exclusively to Thoreau's mentorship by Emerson. As early as winter 1837, Thoreau used a letter to John Jr. as an opportunity to bask in what he

³² Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 39.

³³ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

considered a Native American sympathy with the natural world and a distaste for the material preoccupations of the “silly Pale-Face:”

I know that thou lovest the Great Spirit’s creatures, and wast wont to sit at thy lodge door – when the maize was green – to hear the bluebird’s song. So shalt thou in the land of spirits, not only find good hunting grounds and sharp arrowheads – but much music of birds. Brother. I have been thinking how the Pale Faces have taken away our lands [...]³⁴

The Thoreau brothers’ studies of native people, the studies that led them to invoke “the Pale-face” and “the Great Spirit” in their letters, helped form Henry’s nature-based brand of Transcendentalism. In the following years, Thoreau’s *Journal* as well as published works such as *Walden* lament the detrimental effects of industrialization upon the woods and air of his beloved native town. *The Maine Woods* (published posthumously) combines this proto-environmentalist sentiment with a sympathy for Native peoples, whom he considered the stewards of the natural world.³⁵ Just as Thoreau’s letters to Helen illustrate his pre-Emerson thoughts on European philosophy, his correspondence with John Jr. allowed Thoreau to express an experience-based sympathy with the natural world and the Native people.

Again, this sympathy developed in Thoreau’s thought before he entered the public writing arena. From a stylistic perspective, the imaginative letter above shows Thoreau’s adoption of the persona of the native Tahatawan, and his use of conventionalized Native American code names for leading Concord and Massachusetts citizens. The parable-like composition of Thoreau’s more playful letters precede the stylistic device in *Walden*,

³⁴ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 16-18.

³⁵ Although the treatment of Native Americans in the United States never became a social cause of interest for the Transcendentalists, perhaps least of all Emerson, it is evident that Thoreau became more cognizant of Native suppression than even active reformers in Concord.

wherein he refers to speakers as the Hermit, Poet, and Philosopher – that is, Thoreau, William Ellery Channing, and Amos Bronson Alcott.³⁶

Although these letters come nowhere close to the sophistication of his later work, Thoreau's early written interactions with his siblings indicate two important facts. First, his later method (as we will see) of composing publishable content in his letters is in fact rooted in epistolary habits he formed in the 1830's, writing to his own less educated family. Additionally, Thoreau's early family correspondence suggests that Transcendental ideas began fermenting in his mind before his prolonged exposure to the writing community in Concord. The distillation of these ideas, and, equally importantly, their publication, would come afterwards.

2.4 John Thoreau and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

*Where chiefly shall I look
To feel thy presence near?
Along the neighboring brook
May I thy voice still hear?*
- "Brother where dost thou dwell?"³⁷

John Thoreau's influence on the work of Thoreau warrants extra consideration because John served the dual purpose of enabling Thoreau's compositional creativity, as we have seen, and providing subject matter for Thoreau's first manuscript. At a glance, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* seems first and foremost a tangential travel log. Thoreau details a boat trip as the title indicates, but frequently reflects on and rhapsodizes about his and his brother's shared experiences as if he were piecing together journal entries literally composed in the boat or beneath the stars. In fact, *A Week*

³⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden, Or, Life in the Woods; the Maine Woods; Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985), 501-503; 535-536.

³⁷ Thoreau, ed. Sayre, *A Week*, 2.

includes passages written during and directly following their two-week trip, but by the time Thoreau began and completed an actual draft intended for publication, over five years had elapsed since he and John Thoreau Jr. set out for New Hampshire's White Mountains in 1839. This may strike us as a lengthy interval for Thoreau to wait before formally beginning an account of the journey, but this chronology is put into perspective when we consider that *A Week* was begun only three years after John's death, an event from which it took Thoreau many more years to recover. Furthermore, the book is more than a Transcendentalist travel narrative; it is also a personal history. The catalyst for *A Week*'s composition was not the journey on which it is based, but the death of Thoreau's brother and traveling companion.

Described as the "gay, bright, sympathetic" sibling and the town's favorite between the two, John Thoreau was also his younger brother's best friend.³⁸ Early in 1842 John unexpectedly developed lockjaw after cutting himself shaving and died within a matter of days. Just as Thoreau's behavioral responses to the loss of John intensified for a period during his grieving process, his response in his personal writings also fluctuates. Two months after John died, Thoreau wrote to a friend that "soon the ice will melt, and the blackbirds sing along the river which he frequented, as pleasantly as ever. The same everlasting serenity will appear in this face of God, and we will not be sorrowful, if he is not."³⁹ But the optimism of these sentiments does not appear to last, as we see in the doubt and grief of the verses "Brother where dost thou dwell," sent to his sister Helen Thoreau a year later. Coming to terms with the death of his brother, fellow nature lover,

³⁸ Edward Emerson, *Henry Thoreau, as Remembered*, 21.

³⁹ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 62.

and best friend was a process that took a quarter of Thoreau's life.⁴⁰ The period of recovery would begin in earnest with *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, for the writing of *A Week* was as instrumental in this grieving process as the process was to the writing of *A Week*. It was the last prose elegy Thoreau would write before "John Brown," and he would write the bulk of it from his house by Walden Pond.

While the publication and reception of *A Week* will be discussed at length when we consider Thoreau's advancement in the professional and publishing world, its composition was more dependent on Thoreau's social humanity, precisely because it was inspired by the person to whom Thoreau held the closest personal relationship. Ultimately, John Jr. and Helen Thoreau do not represent the influence of Transcendentalist composition on Thoreau's career; however, through Thoreau's compositions to and about them, we come to understand Thoreau's arrival at Transcendentalism itself.

2.5 Community Writing: The *Journal*

The common inclination to treat Emerson as the center of the professional and social circle in Transcendental Concord makes sense, considering his anchor at the center of the literary movement. However, Thoreau provides us with the most valuable study of the influence of the Transcendentalists' personal relationships upon their professional writing, and of the professional upon the personal. As much as any author, Thoreau used the *Journal* to create and share his writing.

⁴⁰ Linck C. Johnson, *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, with the Text of the First Draft* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), xi.

He called his early book the “Big Red Journal,” although his notes and reflections went into many booklets over the years.⁴¹ Almost predictably, it was Emerson who first suggested Thoreau begin logging his thoughts. Thoreau began his journal in 1837 at the behest of his new friend, recording on October 22nd: “‘What are you doing now?’ he asked. ‘Do you keep a journal?’ So I make my first entry today.”⁴² The following twenty-four years of Thoreau’s life are reflected in the contours and varying tones of his entries.

He sometimes carried a booklet through woods and fields on his walks; or, as “the rule is to carry as little as possible,” he walked in the morning and returned to write in the evening.⁴³ The *Journal* was in this sense a highly personal object, accompanying Thoreau as frequently as he was joined by human company. However, just as Thoreau shared his walks with his Concord friends and visitors, he allowed and invited others of the circle to read in his *Journal*. On numerous occasions, Emerson and Alcott reported to their own journals having read in Thoreau’s, and recorded their delight (generally) with a number of Thoreau’s passages that would later become essays. Thoreau’s circle made notes to themselves, to recommend passages to out-of-town Transcendentalists such as Margaret Fuller, family, or even correspondents overseas: “We have Henry Thoreau here,” Emerson wrote to his literary aunt Mary Moody, “who writes genuine poetry that rarest product of New England wit.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry Thoreau*, eds. Francis H. Allen and Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), Vol. XII, 66.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Vol. IX, 488.

⁴⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), Vol. II, 244.

Thoreau was even known to read aloud from his work to others, although his more personal *Journal* entry records an unhelpful experience with this approach:

Reading from my manuscripts to Miss [Mary Moody] Emerson this evening and using the word ‘god,’ in one instance, in perchance a merely heathenish sense, she inquired hastily in a tone of dignified anxiety, ‘Is that god spelt with a little g?’ Fortunately it was. (I had brought in the word ‘god without any solemnity of voice or connection.) So I went on as if nothing had happened.⁴⁵

Thoreau does not appear to have made a habit of leaving his *Journal* in the possession of others, however. During his famous stay at Walden Pond, discussed more at length later, he carefully locked up his *Journal* and other manuscripts within his green writing desk, even as he left the house itself unlocked. What were the contents of this book, that were simultaneously private, public, and of immense value to the owner?

Prior to Thoreau’s scientific work, discussed later, the *Journal* was partially comprised of what may have been private, unshared reflections (“‘Says I to myself’ should be the motto of my journal,” he wrote), of novel or uncommented-on details of Thoreau’s day, of commentary from and about peers, of those logistical and professional details to which even Henry Thoreau had to attend, and of draft passages that would be circulated to his friends and eventually see the light of publication.⁴⁶

This last use – the *Journal* as the site of Thoreau’s composition and re-composition – is most significant to our purpose of understanding Thoreau as a social author. On pages of the *Journal* we find the usual revisionary markings of an author, but they are frequently made in response to the in-person commentary he received from his peers. Emerson, for example, often commented that Thoreau overextended his own pith,

⁴⁵ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. III, 179. Thoreau would have more serious disagreements over the matter of heresy with his essay publishers in the 1850’s.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

and indulged in too many purposeful contradictions.⁴⁷ The contents of the *Journal* were not circulated strictly as a token of friendship or esteem, then, although we may trust it served this purpose as well. Thoreau circulated his work primarily as a solicitation for feedback and suggestions for revision from his literary sphere. His public journaling suggests his confidence in his peer's opinions of his work, from his early poetry to the multiple drafts of his later monographs.

Of course the *Journal* also reflects that Thoreau learned from his peers how not to write, or advice not to take. The young poet Ellery Channing's language reminded Thoreau of the value of the simplest word: just as Thoreau himself was accused of verbosity in his early work, by 1852 he noted to himself that his writing circle would inflict this crime upon him in his *Walden*-era writing:

Channing calls our walks along the banks of the river, taking a boat for convenience at some distant point, *riparial excursions*. It is a pleasing epithet, but I mistrust such, even as good as this, in which the name is so agreeable, as if it would ring hollow ere long; and rather the thing should make the true name poetic at last. Alcott wished me to name my book *Sylvania*!⁴⁸

As a material object, the *Journal* is the most valuable keyhole to Thoreau's composition as a social act. On its pages and with the corresponding commentary from his friends' journals we know the extent to which he sought their input in the early stages of his writing. However, the more personal entries (perhaps kept private, perhaps not) combined with other bits of his social life left behind also shed light on his sociable nature and authorship. Therefore, let us consider, in consultation with Thoreau's *Journal* and letters, and those of his Concord peers, a few lesser-known individuals who

⁴⁷ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. III, 107.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 418.

contributed to Thoreau's act of composition and his relationship with Concord society during his writing years.

2.6 The Preferred Companion: Ellery Channing

William Ellery Channing II, a volatile but passionate poet, moved to Concord while Thoreau resided for a short time in Staten Island, New York. When Thoreau returned, he found in Channing a developing Transcendentalist to whom Thoreau could relate on a personal, if not always professional, level.

They shared a number of hiking, boating, and skating excursions that appear in Thoreau's writing. The walks Thoreau took in the elite company of Channing fed Thoreau's inspiration and served as his subject matter, as he wrote in his *Journal*: "Methinks I can write better in the afternoon, for the novelty of it, if I should go abroad this morning. My genius makes distinctions which my understanding cannot, and which my senses do not report."⁴⁹

In addition to being the only Concordian who could match Thoreau's commitment to experiencing the natural world on their regular walks together as a source for composition, Channing was also Emerson's protégé. When Hawthorne called Emerson "that everlasting rejecter of all that is, and seeker for he knows not what," he could only have been thinking of the two young Transcendentalist friends, both destined to disappoint the great orator.⁵⁰ Thoreau and Channing were also nearly the same age, and of a similar mind to cast off Concord town when it pleased them.

⁴⁹ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. II, 337.

⁵⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 149.

But Channing and Thoreau employed their individualism and observations through starkly different talents. That is to say, each was competent enough in both poetry and prose to comment on the other's work extensively, and where one fell short the other excelled. They were qualified to meet one another's high literary standards. A few years into his life in Concord, Channing's was perhaps the only Transcendentalist poetry that approached Emerson's level of skill and Thoreau's loyalty to the natural world. In return, Channing found in Thoreau a companion who had no domineering expectations of him but to walk and talk, who provided company without the noise and stress of children (Channing had four when he and Thoreau were closest), and who, although Thoreau did actually graduate from Harvard, sought an intellectualism by way of life and unique thought, and not by academy-based learning.

Unlike Emerson's patronage, Thoreau and Channing's friendship was an even, reciprocal relationship. Thoreau may have even owed a small bit of his professional success to Channing. In 1845, after several years of woods-wandering and conversation, Channing bluntly informed Thoreau that: "I see nothing for you on this earth but that field which I once christened "Briars"; go out upon that, build yourself a hut, and there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no alternative, no other hope for you."⁵¹ We know now just how seriously Thoreau took this advice.⁵²

Channing, a regular visitor to Thoreau's Walden house, would later make an appearance as *Walden's* "Poet," who shows up in good spirits and invites the "Hermit" on an excursion to the Concord River. He is the one *Walden* visitor Thoreau believed

⁵¹ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 161.

⁵² Thoreau's Walden experiment was also inspired by other models of simple living, including the nature-living of one of his former classmates.

was “actuated by pure love.”⁵³ In fact, perhaps more than any other pair among the Concord authors, Channing and Thoreau invoke one another time and again in their published and private writings: Channing is the fellow-traveler in Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, and Channing devoted a number of poems to Thoreau, as well as his poetic biography after Thoreau died in 1862.

One of the major differences between Channing and Thoreau, as with Channing and everyone, rooted in his social antinomianism. While disappointment to the likes of Emerson and Concord town seems to have generated a sympathy between the two, and the originality of each made them good companions, the hyper-individuality of Channing may well have also checked that of Thoreau. In one annoyed journal entry, Thoreau comments after a walk with Channing:

Two young men who borrowed my boat the other day returned from the riverside through Channing’s yard, quietly. It was almost the only way for them. But, as they passed out his gate, C. boorishly walked out his house behind them in his shirt-sleeves, and shut his gate behind them as if to shut them out. It was just that sort of behavior which, if he had met with it in Italy or in France, he would have complained of, whose meanness he would have condemned.⁵⁴

The record left by Channing’s friends show us a neighbor whose eccentricity and temper went beyond the neglect of his wife Ellen to outright disrespect for Concordians themselves, if they passed him on the wrong day. His biographer, Frederick McGill, has posed the possibility that Channing represents what Thoreau may have become “without the tempering influence of Emerson.”⁵⁵ The body of evidence pointing towards

⁵³ Thoreau, ed. Sayre, *Walden*, 501-503.

⁵⁴ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. V, 190.

⁵⁵ Frederick T. McGill, *Channing of Concord: A Life of William Ellery Channing II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967).

Thoreau's sociability suggests otherwise, but Channing must have at least exhibited to Thoreau the correlation between social antinomianism and failure in professional writing.⁵⁶ Channing neglected most editorial and publishing advice and his several books of poetry, though endorsed by Emerson, flopped embarrassingly. While Channing's poetic mind rendered him a beneficial writing companion, he had nothing to teach Thoreau about networking or the working relationships one must foster to be published in 1840's New England. In that endeavor, Thoreau would seek help elsewhere, as we will see in the next chapter.

2.7 A Sphere of Correspondence: Thomas Cholmondeley, H.G.O. Blake, and Daniel Ricketson

English traveler Thomas Cholmondeley, although never a Concord resident, is said to have come to Concord for Emerson, and stayed for Thoreau. Thoreau, in turn, appears well-pleased with his friend's temperament and perception, despite Cholmondeley's indulgence in vices Thoreau scorned in others.⁵⁷ Their friendship was beset with disease in their families, and complicated by distance, as Cholmondeley visited the United States only twice after he and Thoreau met. Nonetheless, Cholmondeley enabled a degree of breadth and global awareness in Thoreau's professional and writing life: he kept Thoreau abreast of world news, such as England Harvests and "war even in old New Zealand," and gifted to Thoreau a set of forty-two books of Hindu literature he would refer to through the rest of his life.⁵⁸ Perhaps most

⁵⁶ Regarding Thoreau's sociability: in addition to seeking input on his professional work, he also hosted melon parties, took a community-based stance for abolition, and exhibited a sense of obligation to his father's business, all with little or no reference to Emerson.

⁵⁷ Moller, *Human Community*, 58.

⁵⁸ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 612.

importantly, the Transcendentalists' proximity to one another allowed them to share these rare books. Alcott held the most distinct honor of borrowing the Bhagavad Gita in May 1855.⁵⁹

Harrison Gray Otis Blake, a Worcester native and teacher, initiated a correspondence between himself and Thoreau, who seems to have found in him a distant but keen receptor for his ideas. Blake's very first letter delved into a discussion of Thoreau's essay on the Roman poet-satirist Aulus Persius Flaccus, which *The Dial* magazine published.⁶⁰ Thoreau responded with explanations of his own philosophies, and the exchange turned into two decades of friendship, including friendly letters about his trip to Fire Island, visit proposals, and family news. Above all, Thoreau sent Blake a number of essays, partial compositions, and notes on forthcoming essays.⁶¹ As Thoreau's dependency on Emerson eventually began to dissolve in the mid-1840's, Thoreau found new, often younger friends to use as his sounding boards, and Blake proved to be both appreciative of Thoreau's time and a critical thinker in response to his work.

Daniel Ricketson, New Bedford's literary lawyer, also instigated a correspondence with Thoreau. If Thoreau found a sounding board in H.G.O. Blake, a friend in Chomondeley, inspiration in Channing, and a mentor in Emerson, Ricketson's letters strike the tone of a disciple. Yet they did visit one another, and the gentle Ricketson must have touched Thoreau on some emotional level (Ricketson later provided

⁵⁹ Alcott, *Journals*, 282. Alcott also received a section of Thoreau's library, which Thoreau instructed his mother and Emerson to give his friend upon his death. Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 608.

⁶⁰ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 213.

⁶¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*, ed. Bradley P. Dean (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

the only account of Thoreau shedding tears as an adult).⁶² Admittedly, Thoreau does not appear as enthusiastic about the friendship, and correspondence is intermittent. Yet while Ricketson may be Thoreau's closest friend who did not contribute substantially to his composition, he demonstrates Thoreau's interactions with his own disciples, and the permeation of Thoreau's sphere by a fan of his work. Through the relationships Thoreau held primarily by correspondence, we see that Thoreau's intellectual spheres did not simply inform his composition. Both Thoreau's published writing and letters expanded his sphere when he discovered the right audiences, and when the right audiences discovered him.

But Thoreau's writing would also have to recommend him to the publishing sphere, not just to an array of friends and local supporters. The following chapter will discuss Thoreau as a networker and published author. What efforts and relationships did Thoreau undertake to make his writing available to the public?

⁶² "He was narrating to me the death of his only brother, John Thoreau, from lockjaw [...] At this time his voice was choked, and he shed tears, and went to the door for air. The subject was of course dropped, and never recurred to again." Daniel Ricketson, *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends: Letters, Poems, Sketches etc.*, ed. Anna Ricketson (New York: AMS press, 1985), 14.

CHAPTER 3

“AND SO FIND MY LIVING GOT”: PROFESSIONAL OUTLETS

3.1 Publication: *The Dial*

As we have seen, Thoreau's *Journal* and letters demonstrate that his composition was a highly social act. But what outlets did he find for his writing, how did he find them, and how does this process illuminate the social and networking components of Thoreau's publication of his writing?

In October of 1843, Thoreau wrote to “Mr. Emerson” that a friend had brought Thoreau a letter and a copy of *The Dial*, “which is a sort of circular letter itself.”⁶³ He referred with his usual good humor to the provincial reputation of the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*. Its life force was the work of Emerson and Margaret Fuller, supplemented by the labor of Thoreau, who stepped in to edit from time to time. In a letter to Fuller, Emerson even refers to himself as the President of *The Dial* and Thoreau as his “private secretary.”⁶⁴

The Dial was often ignored in Boston however, and its second-tier contributors (such as Thoreau and Channing) were subjected to occasional evisceration by the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and James Russell Lowell. Emerson, an editor himself, would later write to Thoreau about the magazine that even Transcendentalists “are always a little ashamed of it.”⁶⁵ But *The Dial* was more than a quarterly missive from the Transcendentalists to themselves: it published many pieces that would achieve their

⁶³ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 145.

⁶⁴ Emerson, *Letters*, Vol. III, p. 47.

⁶⁵ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 194-195.

authors posthumous acclaim, and was the product of a highly interactive network of authors and thinkers that included Thoreau.

Margaret Fuller, the editor of *The Dial*, appears to have preferred Thoreau the man to Thoreau the author; however, she ultimately approved many of his submissions, and Thoreau was published in two-thirds of *The Dial's* issues. Additionally she thought favorably of Thoreau's editorial work on the twelfth issue, published on April 8th 1843. She also wrote Thoreau with pointed criticism and a willingness to adjust and reserve his submitted writings for future issues: "Will you finish the poem in your own way and send it for *The Dial*. Leave out "And seems to milk the sky" The image is too low. Mr. Emerson thought so too."⁶⁶ Fuller also gently rejected "The Service" in 1840, writing to Thoreau that it lacked organization and coherence, but had greater potential than some essays that had in fact appeared in *The Dial*.⁶⁷

The publication history of *The Dial* demonstrates, almost as clearly as Thoreau and Emerson's journals, that Emerson was Thoreau's greatest champion and colleague in the early 1840's. Many of Thoreau's publications in the journal began with Emerson's letters of solicitation to Thoreau for essays on particular subjects such as Greek translations or book reviews, or with a recommendation from Emerson to editor Fuller.⁶⁸ Emerson also spoke on Thoreau's behalf on more logistical matters, inquiring to Fuller in July 1840:

I intended to ask you what rules of distribution do you adopt [for *The Dial*]. Here is Henry Thoreau who subscribed; but I told Weeks & Co. that he is a contributor & not to be charged [...] One thing more –

⁶⁶ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

they made sad typographical errors. In Thoreau's Persius they have printed nature for satire p. 118.⁶⁹

Emerson also provided his own literary insight to Thoreau's ideas and language.

His most common criticism of Thoreau concerned Thoreau's tendency towards intentional contradiction and oxymoron in his writing:

The habit of a realist to find things the reverse of their appearance inclined him to put every statement in a paradox. A certain habit of antagonism defaced his earlier writings, — a trick of rhetoric not quite outgrown in his later, of substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical opposite.⁷⁰

Thoreau appears to have been receptive to Emerson's criticism, as when he writes to Concord from Staten Island: "I doubt if you have made more corrections in my ["Winter's Walk"] manuscript than I should have done ere this, though they may be better; but I am glad you have taken any pains with it."⁷¹

The Dial closed in three years. Elizabeth Peabody, who would later create the *Aesthetic Papers* that published "Civil Disobedience," reported to Emerson that *The Dial* was not financially viable. Emerson writes to his wife that the financial failure was "a plain hint from the upper power that it should stop."⁷² However, less than a year before the thirteenth and final *Dial* issue ran, Thoreau embarked on what he hoped would be a more lucrative publication move: he left Concord.

⁶⁹ Emerson, *Letters*, Vol. II, 310-313.

⁷⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," *The Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, MA), 1862. Reprinted in *The Thoreau Reader*, ed. Richard Lenat, (Thoreau Society, 2009).

⁷¹ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 139.

⁷² Emerson, *Letters*, Vol. III, 154-155.

3.2 New York

Emerson made the move possible, securing Thoreau a tutorship of his brother William Emerson's son in New York. Hawthorne's journal suggests Emerson may himself have benefited by offering this assistance, as Thoreau had lived with the Emerson family for a short time:

Mr. Emerson appears to have suffered some inconveniency from his experience of Mr. Thoreau as an inmate. It may well be that such a sturdy and uncompromising person is fitter to meet occasionally in the open air, than to have as a permanent guest at table and fireside.⁷³

At any rate, Thoreau departed to advance his writing career. Most studies of Thoreau's time at Staten Island characterize the stint as a professional failure, during which Thoreau produced little creative work and failed to secure a regular writing position. He returned to Concord in under a year, and immediately took to house-building and pencil-making for income, which seems to have justifiably reinforced in many biographers' minds the financial unprofitability of Staten Island. In this light, the tendency to declare the abortive foray into literary New York a failure seems understandable. Thoreau did not accomplish his expressed goal and suffered ill health and intense homesickness for Concord: "I do not like their cities and forts," he wrote, "with their morning and evening guns, and sails flapping in one's eye. I want a whole continent to breathe in, and a good deal of solitude and silence, such as all Wall Street cannot buy [...] All my inner man heretofore has been a Concord impression."⁷⁴

However, Thoreau did make a series of new contacts on his trip. Back in Concord, Hawthorne had once invited Thoreau and the editor of the *Democratic Review*,

⁷³ Hawthorne, *American Notebooks*, 175-176.

⁷⁴ This appears in a letter to Thoreau's mother. Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 100.

J. L. O'Sullivan, to tea. Thoreau would now meet with O'Sullivan further in Staten Island, to arrange the publication of "Paradise to Be Regained."⁷⁵ Most importantly, Thoreau achieved a key professional and somewhat personal relationship that should not be overlooked. The friendship he began with Horace Greeley would serve him well for the rest of his life.

With the exception of Emerson, Horace Greeley may have been Thoreau's most esteemed ally. However, unlike Emerson and Fuller, whose relationships with Thoreau directly influenced his writing habits and the composition of individual pieces, Greeley served Thoreau almost exclusively as an agent. He placed Thoreau's "Carlyle and His Works" with *Graham's Magazine*, and hounded them to pay Thoreau when they defaulted for fifteen months.⁷⁶ He placed Thoreau's "Maine Woods" articles in five installments, a much-needed morale boost and source of income during the trying months of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River's* non-publication. Greeley also utilized his publicity-oriented mind on Thoreau's behalf, instigating the publication of excerpts of *Walden* before the full book was to be published by Ticknor & Fields in 1854. And in 1853 Greeley stepped into a disagreement between Thoreau and the publishers of his "Excursion to Canada." Following the unannounced deletion of a sentence that betrayed Thoreau's "heretical" pantheistic views by his publishers, Greeley advised Thoreau (in vain, for once) not to break with *Putnam's Magazine* over the controversy.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 140.

⁷⁶ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 173-174, 217.

⁷⁷ Putnam's was edited by William George Curtis, a friend of Thoreau's who had helped construct Thoreau's Walden house in 1845. For more on this controversy, see Franklin B. Sanborn and Henry David Thoreau, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894), 237; Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 237.

Greeley also made specific, paying requests of Thoreau as his agent: he turned to Thoreau in soliciting biographical sketches of the New England (and peripheral) intellectual community, perhaps because Thoreau's lecture on Sir Walter Raleigh had met with a favorable review from the *Concord Freeman*. But the demand for his commentary on the life and characters of Emerson (by request of Thomas Carlyle) and Hawthorne and Carlyle (by request of Greeley) also suggests to us that Thoreau was not only entrenched in the circle of authors of 1840's and '50's idealism. He was also selected to be a contemporary voice illustrating the individuals comprising it. Thoreau apparently declined to write the articles on his closer friends, foregoing the utilization of his New England circle of authors as explicit subject matter; however, the broadening of his compositional scope into biography in the 1840's would prepare him to write his later defenses of John Brown.⁷⁸

3.3 *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

In 1848 Alcott and Emerson wrote confidently of *A Week's* future on the market. Alcott went so far as to declare it to be "An American book, worthy to stand beside Emerson's *Essays* on my shelves."⁷⁹ Emerson himself pressed Thoreau to publish as soon as possible, even as Thoreau continued to make revisions.⁸⁰ However, once Emerson and Thoreau secured publishers with the time and willingness to read his manuscript, Thoreau received the same answer: a brief rejection. In 1847, shortly after

⁷⁸ Thoreau himself was the subject of a biographical sketch by a friend of Sanborn's, Edwin Morton. The article, "Thoreau and His Books," was published in 1855 by *Harvard Magazine*. Sanborn would move to Concord in May 1855 and play a vocal role in Concord's response to the capture and execution of John Brown. Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Personality of Emerson* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1903), 63. Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 334.

⁷⁹ Alcott, *Journals*, 209.

⁸⁰ Stephen Adams and Donald Ross, *Revising Mythologies: The Composition of Thoreau's Major Works* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 254; Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 119.

returning to Concord town from his Walden house, he noted that his manuscript had been rejected by Crosby & Nichols, Harpers, Munroe, and Wiley & Putnam. In a March 1848 letter, Thoreau exhibits an early disillusionment with the professional tasks to be performed after composition, ironically alongside an expression of self-doubt when his written work is not published:

My book, fortunately, did not find a publisher ready to undertake it, and you can imagine the effect of delay on an author's estimate of his own work [...] I esteem it a rare happiness to be able to write anything, but there (if I ever get there) my concern for it is apt to end.⁸¹

Certainly, Thoreau's claim of disregarding the publication or delivery of his writing may be related to his acknowledged failure to publish *A Week* as of the time of this letter. He finally, at the behest of Emerson, agreed to pay the costs of publication to James Munroe & Co. in return for their publishing and advertisement of the book.

Among the broader Transcendentalist circle, particularly among those who had not seen the manuscript and read the published version with fresh eyes, Thoreau's contemporaries praised *A Week*, but expressed a collective desire that Thoreau should wean himself off his perceived imitation of Emerson. In a letter to Emerson, Theodore Parker acknowledged that Thoreau possessed the skill to write entirely originally, and therefore should seize the opportunity:

I think the book is to be judged by its original part, & not by its imitations, the descriptions of natural objects are certainly uncommonly fine, there is a good deal of sauciness, & a good deal of affectation in the book, the latter seems to me to come from his trying to be R. W. Emerson, & not being contented with his own mother's son.⁸²

⁸¹ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 211.

⁸² Emerson, *Letters*, Vol. IV, 151.

In the papers, the book seems to have polarized Thoreau's viewers, and the harshest public criticism condemns his pantheistic charges against Christianity:

He directly asserts that he considers the Sacred Books of the Brahmins in nothing inferior to the Christian Bible [...] ought not an author to make himself thoroughly acquainted with [the Bible], which if true, is of such transcendent importance, before uttering opinions concerning it calculated to shock and pain many readers, not to speak of those who will be utterly repelled by them? [...] We proffer our column to Mr. Thoreau, should he see fit to answer these questions.⁸³

As far as we know Thoreau did not answer their calls to explain his heresy. This was a characteristic abstention from the author, and perhaps understandable in light of family troubles during that week: his sister Sophia Thoreau died of consumption the day after the *Daily Tribune's* attack.

3.4 Working Towards *Walden*

Thoreau later wrote in his *Journal* about *A Week's* failed publication, gesturing vaguely to poor professional advice he received from Emerson. This episode began a rift between the two authors that would last several years, before a gradual reconciliation. Ultimately, we may conclude from the *Journal* that the publication process and how Thoreau fared within it warranted the author's attention, as both a matter of pride and finances. Certainly he reflects more on *A Week's* failure than one may expect from the author who published, "rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."⁸⁴

Often when Thoreau deigned to discuss such matters as publication in his *Journal*, it was because they afforded him a degree of humor, ironic distance, and self-effacement. Almost a year before the publication of *Walden*, he wrote in the *Journal* of a letter he received from the publisher Munroe, whose staff as of 1853 was impatient to be

⁸³ Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 149-150.

⁸⁴ Thoreau, ed. Sayre, *Walden*, 485.

rid of the unsold copies of his first book *A Week*, which continued to take up space in the seller's house.

So I had them all sent to me here, and they have arrived to-day by express, filling the man's wagon, – 706 copies out of an edition of 1000 which I bought of Munroe four years ago and have been ever since paying for. The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs [...] I now have a library of nearly nine-hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself.⁸⁵

Thoreau's attention to the publication process, and the work it entails, increased steadily from *A Week* to the last decade of his life. He continued to reflect in writing more upon his failures (such as *A Week*, or private criticisms) than upon his successes ("Slavery in Massachusetts", *Walden*). More productively, after *A Week* he began to exert serious effort into networking and communicating with publishers, as we will see, and became, by comparison with his 1848 self, adept at it.

Having subjected himself to publishers' responses to *A Week* and the high standards of Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the *Dial* era – responding to their friendly commentary and editorial demands – Thoreau became an expert at revision. He developed an ethic in editing with a more practical awareness of publication requirements, and eventually became his own harshest critic. By the time he addressed the final edits of *Walden*, his drafts and *Journal* convey a mature, disciplined approach to his own language:

In correcting my manuscripts, which I do with sufficient phlegm, I find that I invariably turn out much that is good along with the bad, which is then impossible for me to distinguish – so much for keeping bad company; but after the lapse of time, having purified the main body and

⁸⁵ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VI, 259.

thus created a distinct standard for comparison, I can review the refected sentences and easily detect those which deserve to be readmitted.⁸⁶

And later:

When I have sent off my manuscripts to the printer, certain objectionable sentences or expressions are sure to obtrude themselves on my attention with force, though I had not consciously suspected them before. My critical instinct then at once breaks the ice and comes to the surface.⁸⁷

When *Walden* finally saw publication in 1854, it achieved a degree of popularity in the New England intellectual community that *A Week* never did. Although its early sales were no indication of its later canonical place in American literature, it even attained some commercial attention. Even Nathaniel Hawthorne, sometimes more a friend of Thoreau's than an admirer of his work, was impressed with the published product. He had once written to an editor that "there is one chance in a thousand that he might write a most excellent and readable book; but I should be sorry to take the responsibility, either towards you or him, of stirring him up to write anything for the series."⁸⁸ Now, he wrote to Ticknor & Fields from England to request copies of both Thoreau's books.

Walden was Thoreau's most successful piece of writing during his lifetime, and of course part of this is compositional. Just as he condensed a two-week trip into seven days in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau wrote the two years, two months and two days he spent at Walden Pond as a single year of observation. *Walden* is the more structured, systematic of the two works, despite its form of a philosophical

⁸⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁸⁷ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VI, 179.

⁸⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Selected Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Joel Myerson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 117.

natural history as opposed to a personal travel narrative. We also find that *Walden*, written over the course of six years and in nine drafts, is also the clearer, more chiseled piece of Transcendentalist work. Thoreau's revision process included the input of his peers and entailed a more elaborate editorial process by Thoreau himself. In other words, Thoreau's writing and publishing experiences prior to 1854 cumulate in the placement and publication of *Walden*.

Ultimately, the discrepancy in the success of Thoreau's first and second book roots fully in the fact that *Walden* is a better book. However, the publication of *Walden* was also more circumspect and professional than that of *A Week*. Once its cohesion, mature prose, and unique idea set recommended it to Horace Greeley and Ticknor & Fields, its publishers and advertisers then enabled its distribution to and acceptance by the wider literary community. Horace Greeley proved a steadfast source of promotion, and *Sartain's Union Magazine* published excerpts from Thoreau's *Walden* as it was being written.⁸⁹ A series of lectures on the subject of the Walden experiment served as additional publicity. So while the Transcendentalist circle praised it even more highly than they did *A Week*, more significantly, Boston and New York accepted it as well. England was better prepared to receive *Walden* than Thoreau's previous work.

Of course it was not without its detractors, once the reviews came in: *The New York Times* reported that "as a contribution to the Comic Literature of America, *Walden* is worthy of some attention, but in no other respects. The author evidently imagines

⁸⁹ Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 233.

himself to be a Philosopher, but he is not. He talks constantly of “vast cosmogonical themes,” but narrows them all down to the nearest line of self.”⁹⁰

But more typical were positive reviews that ranged from benign:

Half mad, but never silly; the half that is not mad, full of truths which if they are not entirely new, have at least lain hidden under the crust of fashion, folly, and listlessness so long as to seem new on being dug out and placed boldly before us. (*Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, 22 September 1854)

To enthusiastic:

The choicest and most popular works on natural history contain no descriptions more charming than those that abound in this volume. A little humor and a little satire are the pepper and salt to this part of the entertainment Mr. Thoreau serves up. Into it we advise the reader – of unvitiated taste and unpalled appetite – to dig deeply. We at least do not come across a Walden every day.⁹¹ (*Albion*)

3.5 The Concord Lyceum

What did Thoreau’s profession in words require of his relationship with greater Concord, beyond Harvard’s alumni and other Transcendentalists? Apart from his writing, Thoreau performed his most active intellectual role in Concord society as the Concord Lyceum curator, and as a frequent lecturer. From 1842 to 1853 the Lyceum elected Thoreau three times to the office of the Concord Lyceum curator, although he declined twice.⁹² In the 1842-43 winter season alone, it appears Thoreau was effective in his reluctant position: given \$109.20 for the entire Lyceum budget, he oversaw the maintenance of the hall during events and procured speakers such as Horace Greeley, Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and Emerson. He returned nine dollars to the

⁹⁰ Bradley P. Dean and Gary Schlamhorst, “The Contemporary Reception of Walden,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1990) 317-18.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 40, 84, 266.

Lyceum at the end of the season, reflecting with some satisfaction: “How much might be done for a town with \$100: I myself have provided a select course of twenty-five lectures for a winter, together with room, fuel, and lights, for that sum, - which was no inconsiderable benefit to every inhabitant.”⁹³ The fact that Thoreau took pride in this management position is also evident in the fact that he advertised for the town lectures, going door-to-door with notices and ringing the town bell before the event.⁹⁴

Thoreau himself lectured at least nineteen times in the Lyceum, a number of these before he ventured out into the rest of New England for other paying engagements. The Concord Lyceum not only informs us of Thoreau’s engagement with his local intellectual community and efficiency in a position of management, but allowed him to practice writing for public ears and delivering his addresses. It also served a networking and advertising purpose: for example, his first Salem Lyceum engagement came when he was invited by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who offered him the standard payment of \$20.⁹⁵

In his early professional years, Thoreau demeaned the credibility of the orator, who “speaks to the mob before him who can hear him; but the writer [...] speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind.”⁹⁶ This is to be expected from a writer who strove to make a living from his work and slaved for years over passages. However, his statement must also be taken with a grain of salt in light of his failed attempts to become a sought-after public lecturer himself, and of the contrast between his mediocre success and the renowned speaking career of his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson.

⁹³ Walter Harding, “Thoreau and the Concord Lyceum,” *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 30, The Thoreau Society (1950): 1-2.

⁹⁴ Sanborn, *Personality of Emerson*, 88.

⁹⁵ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 230-231.

⁹⁶ Thoreau, ed. Sayre, *Walden*, 403.

Thoreau eventually endeavored to lecture publicly, probably in an attempt to reach a new audience and to earn the money he was not earning by publishing before *Walden*. (He would never fully recover from the debt incurred by the publishing of *A Week*.) However, the endeavor unnerved him for some time. That Thoreau was more concerned with experience and understanding than with financial gain is commonly understood, but on one April afternoon, two years before his death, he wrote his explicit views on the discrepancy between his and his neighbors' perspectives on profit and his chosen careers:

Men's minds run so much on work and money that the mass instantly associate all literary labor with a pecuniary reward. They are mainly curious to know how much money the lecturer or author gets for his work. They think that the naturalist takes so much pains to collect plants or animals because he is paid for it [...] "What do you get for lecturing now?" I am occasionally asked. It is the more amusing since I only lecture about once a year out of my native town, often not at all; so that I might as well, if my objects were merely pecuniary, give up the business.⁹⁷

Ultimately, Thoreau's lecturing period provided him with marginal supplemental income and little inspiration. He reflected in his *Journal* that:

I have had but two or three invitations to lecture [outside of Concord] in a year, and some years none at all. I congratulate myself on having been permitted to stay at home thus, I am so much richer for it [...] I cannot afford to be telling my experience, especially to those who perhaps will take no interest in it.

His sense of what he can "afford" is therefore dictated not by the financial element of his life and work, but by his use or loss of time. He desired something more than money

⁹⁷ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. XII, 111.

from his profession, and lecturing generally did not provide him the satisfaction of writing.⁹⁸

3.6 Thoreau at the Lectern

Thoreau demonstrates his stylistic prowess and his cognizance of his audience not only in his lectures, which by the 1850's had developed considerably from "Emersonian impersonation," but also in his commentary on the speaking engagements of his writing circle in Concord. He was satisfied with a late January 1852 lecture by Ellery Channing, but ultimately concludes it was "all genius, no talent." He recognized there were no rhetorical cues given the audience, "no sloping up or down to or from his points [...] I doubt if three in the audience apprehended a tithe what he said. It was so hard to hear that doubtless few made the effort."⁹⁹

While Thoreau may never have felt he had built a true connection with his lecture audience members, he composed his talks with them very much in mind. He preferred to shock listeners when suitable, but toned down such rhetoric when there were other stakes in the matter. "Slavery in Massachusetts" warrants study as an example of Thoreau's strategic composition.

In some ways, the piece is an intersection of Thoreau's biographical commentary featured in his John Brown speeches, his social criticism in "Civil Disobedience" and "Economy," and the balm of the natural world in "Walking" and *Walden*. Originally a speech given at the 1854 annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Framingham, it depicts Thoreau as an early thinker concerned with individuals' rights, and bears an interesting context that provides insight into its composition and language.

⁹⁸ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. IX, 214-215.

⁹⁹ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. III, 249.

In the lecture, after an ironic introduction feigning surprise that the physical enslavement of people has garnered so much attention in Massachusetts, Thoreau proceeded to rail against the governor out of indignation on behalf of Anthony Burns, an enslaved person then recently returned to the South from Massachusetts under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.¹⁰⁰ The remainder of Thoreau's talk condemned Massachusetts for its complacency to its own *social* enslavement. The exaggeration and absurdity of "Slavery in Massachusetts's" introduction may have been off-putting to a society of abolitionists, unless he very masterfully delivered the lines referring to Nebraska as "some wild land a thousand miles off, which appeared to concern [abolitionists]," as well as the indication that governmental control of Massachusetts's major institutions surpassed the atrocities of southern plantations. But more than the moral future of American democracy and its population as a unified entity, Thoreau called for his peers to claim their own rights of principle, through the protection of human rights of enslaved people.

The tone of "Slavery in Massachusetts" is more militant than that of "Civil Disobedience," but with the exception of the declaration that "my thoughts are murder to the state," there was an absence of violence in the language of his talk and published essay that suggests he revised his harsher journal entries from which the speech was drafted. For example, he watered down his journal's sentence declaring "[he] would touch a match to blow up earth and hell together."¹⁰¹

It is difficult to speculate whether or not his particular audience in Framingham, July 1854 would have been put off by the three or four brash moments that never made it

¹⁰⁰ Massachusetts Governor Emory Washburn would fail to be re-elected in November 1854.

¹⁰¹ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VI, 242.

to his speech. And with John Brown's raid still five years down the road, one supposes they would not have attracted the attention of the authorities, any more so than his "murder to the state" comment. However, it is worth noting that Framingham was an unusually large audience for Thoreau, and in just over a month, *Walden* would be published. Perhaps now was not the time to alarm listeners – especially not if there was any chance of his words reaching a national audience that would not be self-selected to sympathize with the abolitionist cause. The final two pages of "Slavery in Massachusetts," suddenly serene as the white water-lily he evokes, may also nod forward to his upcoming publication. In this patently "Thoreauvian" composition, which very well may have served not only his abolitionist beliefs but his own authorial reputation as well, Thoreau's call to combat the social enslavement of white northerners diminished the moral argument abolitionists may have expected to hear.

Thoreau received generally positive but varying receptions to his lectures. He became the subject of some debate in the New York and Boston newspapers in 1849, after he had begun to lecture on the subjects that would become *Walden*. The *New-York Daily Tribune* praised his lecture "Life in the Woods," and then published a reader response that Thoreau "is either whimsy or else a good-for-nothing, selfish, crab-like sort of chap." The *North American and Gazette* weighed in criticizing Thoreau for not taking up "the obligation of labor; it is the command of the Creator." Still other reviews claimed that Thoreau was "witty, sarcastic, and amusing," and "there is not a young man in the land – and very few old ones – who would not profit by an attentive hearing of that lecture."¹⁰² On May 9th 1849, the *Worcester Daily Spy* advised Thoreau to "quit the

¹⁰² Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 145-146.

arena while the novelty [of his cockney philosophy] is still on.” Finally, a reviewer of a lecture he delivered in Maine on “Economy” claimed it “was unique, original, comical, and high-falutin. It kept the audience wide awake, and pleasantly excited for nearly two hours.”¹⁰³ In some respects, the conflicting reviews of Thoreau’s lectures developed into more of a presence in the Massachusetts and New York papers than even Horace Greeley’s intentional advertisement.

3.7 Thoreau to Himself: The *Journal* and Success

As we see in “Slavery in Massachusetts” and in audience and press responses, Thoreau was a fairly adept speaker and unafraid to lecture on forward subjects. But Thoreau’s private writings in the *Journal* also reveal a telling account of his publication affairs – even when the account is silent. Thoreau’s *Journal* shows us little of his response to papers’ reviews of his *Walden* lectures, possibly because he was deeply engaged with creating “Resistance to Civil Government” for Elizabeth Peabody’s *Aesthetic Papers* at the time and proofing the sheets of *A Week* for James Munroe and Company. However, a review of Thoreau’s 1854 *Journal* suggests that even during his most active months with fewer distractions, he recorded few sentiments of gratification upon his professional successes.

He was, however, quick to note those of his contemporaries, such as the demand for Emerson’s lectures in New England, or even the publication of Ellery Channing’s poetry in *The Dial*. By 1854, Thoreau had lectured six years off the radar of most paying institutions, with some limited recognition in Concord, Boston, and Salem. It was then, on July 4th, that he delivered “Slavery in Massachusetts” by request of the Framingham

¹⁰³ *Portland Eastern Argus Semi-Weekly*, (1849), quoted in Jeffrey S. Cramer, introduction to *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

protest coordinator, William Lloyd Garrison. Moncure D. Conway, a friend who attended the lecture, wrote that:

Thoreau had come all the way from Concord for this meeting. It was a rare thing for him to attend any meeting outside of Concord, and though he sometimes lectured in the Lyceum there, he had probably never spoken on a platform. He was now clamoured for [...] a representative of Concord, of science and letters.¹⁰⁴

Conversely, Thoreau's commentary on the trip is limited to the morning of the lecture:

“To Framingham. Great orange-yellow lily, somedays [...] A very hot day.”¹⁰⁵

The next month saw *Walden* finally published. Thoreau completed the work after nine years (including the years on Walden Pond) and six full revisions. Having read drafts throughout the process, Emerson personally recommended it to his Boston friends, and as we have seen, Ticknor and Fields advertised it well in advance. It was to be Thoreau's manifesto, as Thoreau well knew. When the day of publication arrived, he commemorated the event: “August 9 – Wednesday. To Boston. *Walden* published. Elder-berries. Waxwork yellowing.”¹⁰⁶

Why does Thoreau downplay his professional victories in his *Journal*, and the roles others played in them? Perhaps on August 9th, Thoreau may have written ironically. Or, one might suppose Thoreau's failure to write in his *Journal* about his career's victories simply reflects a full subscription to the philosophy of his Transcendental writing: the philosophy that work of any kind should tend towards self-improvement and understanding, not wealth or recognition. However, we know he was not indifferent.

¹⁰⁴ Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography Memories and Experiences* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904) 184-185.

¹⁰⁵ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VI, 384.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 429.

Thoreau invested reasonable effort into making his name known, through his logistical business letters and episodes such as his year in Staten Island, where he sought publishers and the city writing scene. We also know he took pride in his publication, because on August 9th 1854, Emerson spotted him walking through the town “in a tremble of great expectation, looking like the undoubted King of all American lions.”¹⁰⁷

Most likely, gratified commentary simply would not have served any of Thoreau’s primary purposes for his 1850’s *Journal*: to create a collection of passage drafts ultimately bound for letters or publication, and a nature log. In 1854, what role could a reflection of Thoreau’s professional accomplishments have in a journal that could be circulated to one’s professional friends, or could become the next *Walden*? It would not speak to a non-material ideology that Thoreau no doubt believed in the main, and that he worked very hard to present as a ceaseless plane in his published work.

The question remains, then: what did publication mean to Thoreau? Thoreau’s understanding of value was nuanced: he found tremendous worth in the landscapes as subject matter and as conductors of his writing tasks, but also knew the precise monetary worth of the wood in the landscapes he surveyed.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, he seemed to pride himself in the content and message of his work (as one would hope), but he was also aware that there was the matter of a practical living to tend to. Thoreau was sometimes oppressed by the weight of the latter: In 1851, when Thoreau was well into the lecturing business (if not called to run actual circuits, like Emerson) and had also turned to surveying, he reflected on his abandoned dream of being a huckleberry-picker:

¹⁰⁷ Emerson, *Letters*, Vol. IV, 459-460.

¹⁰⁸ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 321.

I also dreamed that I might gather the wild herbs, or carry evergreens to such villagers as loved to be reminded of the woods, and so find my living got. But I have since learned that trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business.¹⁰⁹

In other words, Thoreau's heaven-sanctioned work of writing was cursed by other obligations of the profession: the art of writing necessitated, or was commandeered by, the handles of publication. If Thoreau did not relish his successful publication and lectures, even to himself, we may suppose that the gratification was in the moment of conveyance of the message, not in the reputation it built or the meager financial gain.

¹⁰⁹ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. II, 319-320.

CHAPTER 4

COMMUNITY AND THE SCIENCE OF PHILOSOPHY

4.1 Natural History in Concord

At this point we have considered Thoreau as a writer and published author, and a lecture writer and speaker, all with an eye towards the influences of his intellectual sphere upon his work. There remains one major professional endeavor to analyze, which I will argue constituted another form of imaginative composition. That is, his work as an amateur naturalist, which as we will see resulted from Thoreau's personal and professional relationships – many of them new – in ways more subtle than his earlier literary publications and lectures.

In some capacity, perhaps Thoreau was as suited for nature study as a profession as he was writing. Emerson reflected in his 1850 journal:

Now that the civil engineer is fairly established, I think we must have one day a naturalist in every village as invariably as a lawyer or doctor [...] the universal impulse toward natural science in the last twenty years promises this practical issue. And how beautiful would be the profession. C. T. Jackson, John L. Russell, Henry Thoreau, George Bradford, and John Lesley would find their employment.¹¹⁰

To be sure, Thoreau's skill in natural observation was crucial to his most philosophical and literary writing: even "Slavery in Massachusetts" concludes with two pages of natural imagery (inspired by the white water lily) in which hope for the state is restored in the optimism Thoreau feels when he considers the state's future as inextricably linked to the natural world. But while Thoreau subscribed to the belief common among Transcendentalists that nature provides a lens through which to view the higher laws of

¹¹⁰ Emerson, eds. Emerson and Forbes, *Journals*, Vol. VIII, 131. Thoreau was listed as a "Civil engineer and Surveyor" in the Massachusetts Register: A State Record For the Year 1852, LXXXVI, by George Adaps. He was the only Concord engineer listed.

the universe, he also believed those laws became all the more distinct and proven, the more literal a study of the natural world one performs. Therefore, more than any other author of Thoreau's literary and Transcendentalist sphere, he took to scientific naturalism as a philosophical endeavor.

Thoreau's early introductions to natural history occurred well before Emerson's influence, at the Concord Academy (1828-1833) where Phineas Allen taught botany, and in the student Natural History Society at Harvard College.¹¹¹ During his professional life, however, Thoreau's friends and Transcendentalists in Concord assisted his study: Emerson, we know, first set Thoreau to the task of writing an essay on the *Natural History of Massachusetts* in 1842. Elizabeth Hoar, Edward Hoar, and Emerson frequently brought Thoreau plants for his personal study.¹¹² Thoreau became so knowledgeable of Concord's flora and fauna that by the 1850's, he was disturbed when his Concord friends discovered part of the natural world with which he was unfamiliar. Emerson wrote in his journal, "My two plants the deerberry *vaccinium stamineum* and the golden flower *Chrisopsos* – , were eagerly greeted here. Henry Thoreau could hardly suppress his indignation that I should bring him a berry he had not seen."¹¹³

In large part, however, Thoreau's most frequent Concord colleagues in natural study were less exalted figures than his publishing colleagues Emerson, Fuller, and Greeley. But his somewhat less sophisticated sphere of nature lovers in Concord held for him genuine appreciation: In June 1852, for example, Ellery Channing wrote in his

¹¹¹ Ray Angelo, introduction to *Botanical Index to the Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Ray Angelo (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984).

¹¹² Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. IV, 298-303.

¹¹³ Emerson, *Letters*, Vol. IV, 388.

journal that “all I know of Botany, I learnt from H. D. T. & of birds, but nothing of landscape or of men.”¹¹⁴ Edward Hoar remained a devoted friend of Thoreau’s and an appreciator of his botanical prowess, even offering to pay full expenses if Thoreau would embark on a nature study excursion with him to the White Mountains in 1858.¹¹⁵ Even Ellen Emerson, Waldo Emerson’s daughter, recalls the natural experiments Thoreau ran in the company of Concord’s children:

[Mr. Thoreau] said he should like to see how transparent snow was, and we dug into the snow-drift a hole with one side 4 inches thick and one 14 and about 6 inches from the top, then we put the lamp in and walled it up with a block of snow eight inches thick, through the four inches one could see to read, through the fourteen the lamp shone bright and shining like a lantern [...] Mr Thoreau was quite delighted and so we all were with our experiments.¹¹⁶

Thoreau himself was informed by other amateurs beyond the running of experiments and collection of specimens. On April 28th 1856, he was satisfied to know George Hubbard’s insight that “if [young pitch pines] were cut down oaks would spring up, and sure enough, looking across the road where Loring’s white pines recently stood so densely, the ground was all covered with young oaks.”¹¹⁷ From this, Thoreau wrote and published an influential lecture and essay, “The Succession of Forest Trees,” which has extended the greatest influence upon future generations of ecological study of all

¹¹⁴ William Ellery Channing II MS Journal. Houghton Library, Harvard University, quoted in Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 225.

¹¹⁵ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 517.

¹¹⁶ Ellen Tucker Emerson, *The Letters of Ellen Tucker Emerson*, ed. Edith E. W. Gregg (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1982), 127-128.

¹¹⁷ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VIII, 315.

Thoreau's works.¹¹⁸ Even in his time, Thoreau's address found an audience in organizations such as the Boston Society of Natural History and the *New England Farmer*.¹¹⁹

Although residents of Concord seemed to be glad of their "village naturalist," we will see that he performed the vast majority of his meticulous, quantitative nature study alone. This was Thoreau's great divergence, after the gradual weaning from Emersonian prose and personal dependence prior to the drafting and publication of *Walden*. As Thoreau set his sights on a more scientific natural philosophy, to what extent did he seek a new sphere of intellectual peers for consultation?

4.2 Thoreau Among the Professionals

To be sure, a good deal of laboratory work and scientific publication disseminated from Harvard College during Thoreau's writing years. But Thoreau distrusted professional science's sterility, and held particular qualms about the practice of mounting animal and insect specimens. When Horatio R. Storer wrote to Thoreau, asking for birds' eggs from the Concord area, Thoreau expressed his discomfort with "thieving" eggs from birds' nests.¹²⁰ By 1854 Thoreau's attitude towards the preservation of natural life was firm:

To be serene and successful we must be at one with the universe. The least conscious and needless injury inflicted on any creature is to its extent a suicide. What peace – or life – can a murderer have? [...] The inhumanity of science concerns me, as when I am tempted to kill a rare

¹¹⁸ For more on Thoreau and the trajectory of U.S. ecological thought, see Laura Walls, *Seeing new Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and the Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) and James McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹¹⁹ Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 581-584.

¹²⁰ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 175-76.

snake that I may ascertain its species. I feel that this is not the means of acquiring true knowledge.¹²¹

Thoreau's aversion to killing and vaulting fauna for study seems in line with his published philosophy: the value of nature is not purely in its structure and taxonomy, but the lessons it teaches on how to construct our intellectual and moral lives.¹²² But in 1847, he corresponded for several months with James Elliot Cabot about specimens (fish and tortoise) that he sent from Concord to Harvard. Cabot was the secretary to the renowned naturalist, Louis Agassiz. We may suppose, then, that in the 1840's Thoreau may have aspired to a working relationship with scientific professionals, and hoped to contribute to the body of scientific knowledge.

In June 1849, about the time poet Ellery Channing moved to Concord, Thoreau wrote to Louis Agassiz on behalf of the Bangor Lyceum, to propose a lecture in Maine. Agassiz's reply, his only direct response to Thoreau, was a cordial decline.¹²³ Thoreau would not hear from Agassiz again until he received a form letter from Harvard requesting more specimens. Agassiz was creating a natural history of the nation's fishes at the time, and relied on field scientists, including amateurs such as Thoreau, to collect.¹²⁴ In the 1840's and '50's, scientific study depended upon a nation's worth of investigators; in other words, even as the realm of naturalists professionalized further, studies such as Agassiz's *Natural History of the Fishes of the United States* called for an

¹²¹ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VI, 310-11.

¹²² Despite his preference for nature study in his subjects' live habitat, Thoreau takes particular note in his *Journal* of his opportunities to see the more exotic animals Concord could not offer. He took Ellen Sewell to see the giraffe on display in Concord in 1839, and notices the comparative sizes of the skins of cats of prey in Barnum's Museum in 1856.

¹²³ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 244.

¹²⁴ Kenneth Walter Cameron. *Companion to Thoreau's Correspondence* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1965), 194.

early form of crowd-sourcing. Thoreau did in fact answer this call: today his donated *Enneacanthus obesus* specimen remains in the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.¹²⁵ Of course, Thoreau himself had relied upon his neighbors' discoveries and the specimens they donated to his Concord studies. As much as could be useful, Thoreau was interested in contributing to the sort of crowd-sourced science from which he himself had benefited.

Although Agassiz does not appear to have had time for correspondence with Thoreau, an amateur field naturalist when professional laboratory scientists were on the rise, he remained on Thoreau's radar. On the first day of 1853, Thoreau pointedly reported in his *Journal* that according to his sources, Louis Agassiz had pronounced Dr. Thaddeus William Harris the world's finest entomologist.¹²⁶ Thoreau finally met Louis Agassiz in person in 1857, as they both attended a dinner at Emerson's.¹²⁷ Later he reflected with some satisfaction on his opportunities to correct Agassiz's understanding of Concord fauna, writing in his *Journal* that Agassiz and an associate had "not seen the common glow-worm [...] Showed to Agassiz, Gould, and Jackson, and it was new to them."¹²⁸ Thoreau's attitude towards Agassiz's more uncommon beliefs, outlandish from our twenty-first century vantage point, is not always clear. For example, he offers no further commentary but quotes Emerson's report at length that "Agassiz tells him he has had turtles six or seven years, which grew so little, compared with others of the same size

¹²⁵ Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 177, 181; "Ichthyology 40687: *Enneacanthus obesus*," MCZBase: The Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, accessed 2 September 2012, <http://mczbase.mcz.harvard.edu/guid/MCZ:Fish:40687>.

¹²⁶ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. IV, 440.

¹²⁷ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. IX, 298-299.

¹²⁸ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. X, 247-248.

killed at first, that he thinks they may live four or five hundred years.”¹²⁹ (Thoreau, having raised his own turtles from egg to hatchling and observed them throughout Concord, presumably knew the life expectancy of area turtles.)

We find in Thoreau’s dealings with Agassiz a characteristic satisfaction with his own select contributions to the world of scientific knowledge. His commentary on their interaction lacks the usual barbs of his more damning portraits, much in the way that his indignation at his treatment by Emerson during and after the publication of *A Week* never approached outright hostility. When Thoreau received reports from Agassiz’s and Emerson’s Adirondack excursion, his *Journal* takes a tone that is bemused or disappointed at worst:

Emerson says that he and Agassiz and Company broke some dozens of ale-bottles, one after another, with their bullets, in the Adirondack country, using them for marks. It sounds rather Cockneyish [...] Think of Emerson shooting a peewee (with shot for Agassiz, and cracking an ale-bottle (after emptying it) with his rifle at six rods.¹³⁰

Such was the behavior of Thoreau’s professional superiors, when they ventured on this particular outing into the natural world. Ultimately, we sense Thoreau held appropriate respect for the Boston-based naturalist. However, he was not concerned with entering his good graces, perhaps after the 1840’s.

Thoreau never even attempted to contact Asa Gray, who was less receptive to a Transcendentalist philosophy of naturalist study than James Cabot or C.T. Jackson. We are certain Thoreau read his manuals, and Gray’s influence upon his thinking is clear: Thoreau built his habit of referring to organisms by their Latin names off taxonomy used in books such as Gray’s *Manual of the botany of the northern United States* [...]

¹²⁹ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VIII, 342.

¹³⁰ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. XI, 118-120.

arranged according to the natural system.¹³¹ In 1848, Thoreau had referenced “*Pinus nigra*” in his “Ktahadin” essay; however, after Asa Gray’s manual appeared, Thoreau corrected the reference to “*Abies nigra, cavvinium citis-idea*.”¹³²

As we recall, Thoreau was Concord’s local expert, and appears to have had few nearby equals in botanical knowledge and understanding. Why then, was there so little correspondence between Concord’s “village naturalist” and the Harvard professionals with whose work he was so familiar?

Perhaps Thoreau’s experience with Louis Agassiz reinforced his keen awareness of his position beneath Agassiz in the professional hierarchy of nature’s students. In more than one journal entry, Thoreau noted his own straddling position between science and philosophy, and did not believe the professional naturalists held an appreciation of his total work. Shortly before the publication of *Walden*, upon receiving a form letter from the Association for the Advancement of Science inquiring what branch of science he was interested in, Thoreau commented in his *Journal* that:

[...] I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe to [the Association for the Advancement of Science] that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. [...] The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.

“How absurd that, though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most, yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only! If it had been the secretary of an association of which Plato or Aristotle was the

¹³¹ Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau’s Reading*, 191.

¹³² Ray Angelo, Introduction to *Botanical Index*.

president, I should not have hesitated to describe my studies at once and particularly.¹³³

In other words, the professionalization of science could not withstand the retention of philosophy, and so Thoreau had no permanent place among the professionals.

That is not to say, however, that he had no meaningful interactions with professional or organized scientists. Thoreau's contributions to scientific knowledge during his time are fairly well-documented, and his movements within and contributions to professional circles beyond the Transcendentalists become particularly obvious in the last decade of his life. Thoreau joined one professional scientific organization, albeit under very particular circumstances. In December 1850 he was elected by the Boston Society of Natural History, who requested his continued contribution of knowledge and specimens, and in return gave him the position of a "corresponding member," for which entering fees and the annual dues were waived. Thoreau was pleased to use his membership benefits, most particularly access to the BSNH library.¹³⁴

From July 1851 onward, Thoreau checked out works such as William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina*, Edward Tuckerman's *Synopsis of the Lichens of New England*, Kirby and Spence's *Introduction to Entomology*, and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Indian Tribes of the United States*.¹³⁵ He entertained friends like Daniel Ricketson in the Society display rooms, and wrote to the Society of his findings of nature

¹³³ Thoreau's reflection of the AAS letter is found in: Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. III, 3-5. He responded nine months later, on 19 December 1853: Thoreau, eds. Harding and Bode, *Correspondence*, 309.

¹³⁴ Thoreau and Sanborn, *Familiar Letters*, 226.

¹³⁵ Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*.

long after he decided not to kill actual specimens for their study.¹³⁶ As late as October 13th 1860, as the years closed in upon Thoreau, he still wrote to BSNH of a Canadian Lynx found in Massachusetts (and the letter was included in their annual proceedings).¹³⁷

He also lectured, often by invitation, on the topics of “Autumnal Tints,” “Succession of Forest Trees,” and “Wild Apples,” among others. Because the public lecture afforded more compositional freedom than the work scientific professionals were expected to produce, and because Thoreau had several years of experience lecturing, with increasing success, lecturing appears to have been a compromise between the realms of philosophy and science that Thoreau sought to join. On November 21st 1854, Thoreau delivered a lecture in Philadelphia on moose hunting, but reports nothing to his *Journal* of his talk’s content – paying more attention to the soil type alongside the railroad during the trip, the men who assisted him, and the view from the cupola of the State House. It was, however, a notable honor to be invited to Philadelphia by the Academy of Natural Sciences.¹³⁸

In 1862, the Boston Society of Natural History passed a resolution of regret upon Thoreau’s death. In addition to the common references to his originality and genius, the record notes: “Thoreau had a genuine love of nature, and pursued natural history for his own gratification, and not with any ambitious views. He was greatly troubled to find that

¹³⁶ “Extracts from Ricketson’s Journal,” Anna Ricketson and Walton Ricketson. *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1902), 289.

¹³⁷ Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 574.

¹³⁸ Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. VII, 74.

anything had escaped the observation of eminent naturalists, and seemed surprised that anything should have been left by them for him to discover.”¹³⁹

Thoreau, then, contributed a surprising amount of insight and a number of professional engagements to the scientific community as well as other amateurs like himself. And for all this, it does not follow that Thoreau abandoned the social opportunities that his Transcendentalist circle afforded. For example, we know that when *On the Origin of Species* was published, Charles Brace of New York City visited Concord, keen to discuss it with Thoreau, Alcott, and Sanborn. Thoreau borrowed the book from Sanborn until he could procure his own copy.¹⁴⁰

But Thoreau’s insights into Concord discussions in the late 1850’s stemmed more than ever from his expertise in the natural world, and this was his unique and most valuable contribution to the Concord talks. After a session on “the Ideal Theory,” Alcott reported that “Thoreau is large always and masterly in his own wild ways. With a firmer grasp of the shows of nature, he has a subtler sense of the essence and personality of the flowing life of things than most men, and he defended the Ideal Theory and Personal Identity to my great delight.”¹⁴¹

4.3 Quantifying Transcendentalism

Thoreau had certainly racked up a debt to the intellectual vibrancy of New England as he began writing and publishing – a debt that he only repaid in part while under the tutelage of Emerson. As Thoreau enlarged his circle of peers to younger

¹³⁹ Society Records 271, quoted in Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 609.

¹⁴⁰ Thoreau also would have brought to these discussions a thorough understanding of other scientific readings, including Darwin’s *Voyage of a Naturalist Round the World*.

¹⁴¹ Alcott, *Journals*, 317.

Transcendentalists, distant correspondents, and the periphery of the scientific world, he fitted himself to offer the world a unique body of Transcendentalist work rooted in experiential natural philosophy. *Walden*, the result of hundreds of private discussions and a coordinated publication effort, represents some of the best Thoreau had to offer. But the last five years of Thoreau's *Journal* indicate that he was not finished. In fact, as Thoreau turned away from his oldest personal influences, his composition takes a scientific yet idealistic and creative turn.

Much of Thoreau's late *Journal* did not see the light of publication. Our discussion of his late Transcendentalism, much of which he formulated without the benefit of a supportive, informed peer network, relies chiefly on composition.

In the late 1850's Thoreau's letters indicate he was very much preoccupied with his estate-holding responsibilities following his father's death, a substantial surveying contract, and the fate of John Brown following the unsuccessful abolitionist raid on Harper's Ferry. However, Thoreau's *Journal* continued to be filled with quantitative and descriptive natural observations, which would serve as the foundation for an enormous mass of writing, dictation, and editing he undertakes in his final years as his health declined. Today's repositories of Thoreau manuscripts hold masses of loose and bound pages of nature catalogs in which Thoreau lists his observations of Concord flora and fauna. In the last decade biologists and environmental historians have found these papers to be a small windfall as evidence of climate change: Thoreau provides us with an

astonishing data set of nineteenth century New England biology and phenology, upon which other amateur and professional naturalists have built centuries of study.¹⁴²

Many of these papers are disorganized or cataloged only by box, in places such as Harvard's Houghton Library.¹⁴³ However, they form a neglected scientific dimension of Thoreau's Transcendentalism and provide insight into his divergence from his writing peers in Concord during the last six years of his life. What do we make of the scientific notes Thoreau made in his *Journal*, alone in the fields and woods of Concord, between *Walden* and his death?

Literary scholars, not least Sherman Paul, commonly accept the post-*Walden* years during which these lists were created and organized as something of a descent from Transcendentalism to science for Thoreau.¹⁴⁴ Certainly, the schematics of the *Journal* and these notes depict a systematic thinker devoted to citizen science. However, I argue that the changing content and layout of these lists from 1853 to Thoreau's death in 1862 display patently Transcendentalist characteristics – even if Thoreau no longer relied fully on prose to convey them, even if they reflect a shift from Emerson's to scientific influences upon Thoreau's writing, and even if the resulting work remained unpublished for so long that it has failed to permeate his reputation in the public consciousness.

Thoreau's greatest commercial success, *Walden*, hinges on lengthy passages of nature writing, from the "game" he plays on Walden Pond (anticipating where on the

¹⁴² See the 2006-2012 work of Richard B. Primack and Abraham J. Miller-Rushing, in particular "Uncovering, Collecting, and Analyzing Records to Investigate the Ecological Impacts of Climate Change: A Template from Thoreau's Concord," *BioScience* 62, no.2 (2012).

¹⁴³ Thoreau's nature observation manuscripts are also found in Middlebury College, Vermont, and the Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

¹⁴⁴ See especially the latter half of: Sherman Paul, "The Wise Silence: Sound as Agency of Correspondence in Thoreau," *New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters* 23 (1950).

water's surface a loon will appear to laugh at him), to pages spent narrating a battle of mythological proportions between red and black ants. By the time *Walden* was published, however, Thoreau had also begun to fill his Journal with lists of the world around him, many of which were never incorporated into his fluid prose. One such column begins:

1853¹⁴⁵

Dry scent of leaves – March 20

Maple sap runs – [March] 20

Oaks losing leaves, Rush at 2nd Division 2 in. high under water
– 24

March winds – 24

Maple buds red – 25

Take off great coat – 26

Alder pollen on water – 26

It is a mistake to take such lists as the short-attention jottings of a mind too scientific to find a larger romantic meaning in his data points. We must remember, after all, that *Walden* was still in its final revision stages in 1853, and Thoreau continued to use prose nature writing, even in his political commentaries, for the rest of the decade. Furthermore, Thoreau maintained the vital maneuver of his life-long Transcendental philosophy: the placement of the individual within nature. In fact, these deceptively sparse list items convey personal details more minute than his earlier Transcendental books even attempt. The leaves are not simply dry; he detects their dry scent. It is not simply warm by March 26th; he removes his great coat. Other entries note “muddy walking” and “seek sheltered places.” The key Transcendental tenet of experiential knowledge is realized in these lines, most of which saw only posthumous publication, of those published at all. In 1837 Thoreau had lamented to his sister the prevalence of

¹⁴⁵ Henry Thoreau MS. “Rough Notes on General Phenomena,” John Hay Library, Brown University, Albert Lowndes Collection on Henry David Thoreau. Manuscript Accession No. A55872(22).

“Mental Philosophies,” and his late *Journal* is evidence that he lived his rebuttal. His earliest publications like *A Week* featured rhapsodic passages of transcendence; as he approached middle age, however, Thoreau wished to quantify the experiences in nature that made such transcendent moments possible.

By 1857, Thoreau’s *Journal* and loose lists appear more strictly as catalogs of species. One leaf, simply titled “Insects of 58,” lists his findings from the first “January small water bugs abundant” to “April 1st – Wasps, Large water bugs” to “Aug. 12th Glow-worms” and through September.¹⁴⁶ Other monthly lists note the appearance of flower species, the local weather in Concord, and other phenomena. At first consideration these lists are in fact a deviation from Thoreau’s overt situation of himself within the natural world. However, in the last years of his life, as he prepared his notes for a final publication, Thoreau’s 1860-1862 nature lists suggest a grander purpose behind the lists. He begins to classify his earlier notes by *event*, recording next to each the dates on which they occur over the course of several years. The loon, we know quite definitively now, returns to Walden in June four years in a row, and *Quercus Illicifolia* begins to leaf on May 17th, 15th, and 20th in a three-year span. Suddenly, even the most barren list in Thoreau’s manuscripts has a role in a larger project: quantifying the return of the seasons.

What is the modern significance of Thoreau’s reorganization of his phenological data? Early annual records speak for themselves in their use by today’s biologists. But considering Thoreau’s developing strain of Transcendentalism, it is also important to acknowledge these sparse lists and charts as a new manifestation of a similar philosophy we see in the Concord authors during the 1840’s. Thoreau’s recording of his sensory

¹⁴⁶ Henry Thoreau MS. “Insects of 58,” Houghton Library, Harvard University, Henry David Thoreau manuscripts.

perceptions exhibit an appreciation of nature's cycles that is patently Transcendentalist; the charts amount to *Walden* in list form for him. In short, Thoreau did not "descend" into an isolated cold world of science. He incorporated science and quantification into a romantic worldview that had progressed for years.

This final scientific element to Thoreau's Transcendentalism appears to have been lost on Emerson. Emerson marveled at his friends' skills of observation, but they appear to be something of a novelty to the "Sage of Concord." Emerson writes in May 1856 (and would publish in Thoreau's eulogy) that:

[Henry] was in search of yellow violet (*pubescens*) and *menyanthes* which he waded into the water for; and which he concluded, on examination, had been out for five days. Having found his flowers, he drew out of his breast pocket his diary and read the names of all the plants that should bloom this day, May 10; whereof he keeps accounts as a banker when his notes falls due; *Rubus triflora*, *Quercus*, *Vaccinium*, etc.¹⁴⁷

He may have written more candidly for Thoreau's funeral what he felt this nature observation amounted to, in a famous line that referred to Thoreau as the "captain of a huckleberry party," when there was productive societal work to be done.

Thoreau did not complete his final manuscripts, which combine the methodology of his late *Journal* lists with a tempered Transcendentalist style and his usual optimistic nature writing.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps if he had, he could have outgrown his reputation as a lone thinker who hid in the woods at Walden Pond until he died, and whose musings somehow reached our bookshelves today. However, it is not too late to reconfigure our conception of Thoreau, his writing process, and his shifting brand of Transcendentalism.

¹⁴⁷ Emerson, "Thoreau," *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, MA), 1862.

¹⁴⁸ In the late 20th century Bradley P. Dean pieced together much of the prose portions of Thoreau's unfinished work in *Faith in a Seed*.

As evident in the more overtly Transcendentalist writings, such as the published *A Week* and *Walden*, Thoreau's dedication to the natural world and his place within it appear almost from his earliest surviving papers. Therefore the nature lists in Thoreau's *Journal* and a consideration of his changing circle of intellectual peers require our attention not as the death of his romantic sensibilities, but as the final chapter in a consistently idealistic literary career. The final years of Thoreau's *Journal* mark not the atrophy of his poetic faculties, but his successful joining of natural science and philosophy. This joining was made possible when Thoreau accessed the philosophical idealism he cultivated with the Transcendentalist sphere as well as the scientific knowledge he accrued from his reading and less arduous relationships with professional naturalists and scientific organizations.

The frequency of Thoreau's late *Journal* references to the "Concord Quartet" declines, possibly as Nathaniel Hawthorne left Concord for extended periods, Bronson Alcott aged, and Thoreau came to rely less on the stylistics of his greatest mentor, Emerson. However, a decisive strain of Transcendentalism remains in his *Journal* throughout the rest of his life, keeping alive his optimistic outlook in more creative ways than he's credited. The fact that he retained this Transcendentalist focus through the end of his life, even as his methods of composition placed him very much within society and human interactions, affords him a unique position among the nineteenth century New England authors. Among the Transcendentalists, the "hermit of Concord" has proven to be one of the most introspective yet sociable, the most consistent yet imaginative of them all.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Thoreau was in demand socially and professionally in Concord even in the last years of his life. In 1861 George Stearns asked him to write an essay for the abolitionist cause, and Daniel Ricketson invited him to New Bedford to visit. Moncure Daniel Conway hoped Thoreau would contribute work to a revived version of *The Dial*.¹⁴⁹ Thoreau's health precluded most of these things. In fact, his death at the age of 44 aborted his final Transcendentalist project, the charts and observations in the late *Journal*. But more importantly, his premature death cut short his opportunities to extend this product of natural history and philosophy to his intellectual peers in a strategic way that would increase the likelihood of its wider circulation. Whatever Thoreau owed to the intellectual community after it provided for him before *Walden*, he continued to repay until 1862, the year he died of tuberculosis. His illness had been exacerbated when he caught pneumonia counting tree rings on Fair Haven Hill in Concord.

Nonetheless, Thoreau's compositional strategies and professional successes and failures point us to his creativity and intellectual sociability as a prose author, lecturer, and natural philosopher. On a superficial level, we are pleased to find Thoreau subject to the trivial logistics of contacting publishers and being rejected, or to mild irritation with his friends over mundane things. His moments of pettiness, irony, idealism, and even silence speak to us in ways his published work cannot. Few of these details and moments of stark non-transcendence are to be found, and certainly none conveyed with much transparency, in the likes of *Walden's* final draft.

¹⁴⁹ Manuscript letter from Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio, quoted in Borst, *Thoreau Log*, 599.

More importantly, his relationships indicate the extents to which, for mid-nineteenth century Concord, writing and publication were creations of the author's independent composition, the tightly knit circle of Transcendentalists, the Boston publishing houses, and the shifting nature of the movement in the late 1850's. This broader intellectual perspective of the movement retains a component of sociality that may not be discerned by reading published works or biography alone. What emerges from the journals and correspondence of Thoreau's world is an illustration of Thoreau as a Transcendentalist, naturalist, friend and peer, and working professional.

It would strain credibility to assert that Thoreau represents all of Concord's Transcendentalists in his writing and publication affairs. However, the variability of his career and his personal responses to the professional world place him in an important historical role within the Concord writing circle. To be sure, the make-up of his inner sphere changed over the last decade of his life, particularly as the 1850's came to a close. This occurred to Thoreau's benefit: at all stages of his career, the element of community inspired and contributed to Thoreau's composition. In turn, the publication of his compositions expanded the radius of the writing and professional communities he tapped, broadening his horizons from prose to science.

His slow transition from the tight Concord authors, to the wide Transcendentalist circle and their professional associates, to the New England scientists exemplifies the morphings of his literary age. During Thoreau's writing career, Transcendentalism shifted and would continue to shift from its strict association with a select few works (such as *Nature*) to a more expansive movement worthy of its broad definition. Transcendentalism may be defined as New England idealism, as it appeared in these

decades of philosophical thought championing the individual. However, as Thoreau's dynamic practices demonstrate, even Transcendentalist thought centered upon the individual relied on a sprawling collective of thinkers.

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